

Agamben's Biopolitics in China*

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Agamben's biopolitics enters China and arouses great interest due to its close relation with the important topics of concern in China at present. Agamben's biopolitics is influenced by Foucault's thought and Agamben uses the term "biopolique" put forward by Foucault. In the process of translating this term, Chinese scholars have been deepening their understanding of biopolitics. Chinese scholars' understanding of and reflection on Agamben's biopolitics are mainly manifested in three aspects. In epistemology, Chinese scholars have analyzed human being's living situation at present from the perspective of Agamben's biopolitics and revealed the possible crisis of life. Methodologically, it is believed that Agamben has developed the philosophical archaeology, genealogy, paradigm, and other methods to investigate the ancient in order to identify the present, which is helpful to eliminate the essentialist mode about knowledge production. Practically, Chinese scholars have reflexively criticized the "inoperative" political practice concept proposed by Agamben that invalidates the managerial apparatus, and further advance their thinking of the political subject and the political action.

Keywords: Agamben, biopolitics, China

Introduction

Contemporary Italian thinker Agamben not only concentrates on the relationship between life and politics, but expands to the study of the relationship between body and social apparatus to reveal the hidden forms of the appropriation of life. Chinese scholars have taken a keen interest in Agamben's biopolitics. At present, there are mainly two views. Some scholars think that Agamben's biopolitics is a critical theory, which is related to the managerial apparatus of governing the whole life of human beings in contemporary capitalist society. Agamben gives a unique perspective for the researchers to see through the modern Western political pretensions to democracy and freedom and the destruction of life in modern politics. Another view is that Agamben engages in the appeal for the people to create new political forms and human life styles although he shows that the production of a biopolitical body by sovereign power causes the absence of human life (inhuman state). Chinese scholars' interpretation of Agamben's biopolitics reflects two trends of China today. The first trend is the whole Chinese society's concern for life itself. The rapid social development in China leads to the improvement of people's life consciousness which requires people to look more deeply into the actual situation and the possibilities of life. Furthermore, the utilitarianism following with the developments in modern society posed a certain threat to life. People yearn to get rid of some kind of advanced abstract concept about life, seeking the form of the presence of life belonging to oneself. The second is Chinese society's reflection on the

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Western radical left. The radical left spares no effort to criticize capitalism and proposes the practical ideas of radical politics. Agamben talked in details about the various mechanisms of governance technology and insisted that human liberation and redemption should happen in this world, but Agamben seems not to subscribe the practical ideas of radical left. In Agamben's opinion, the human beings have been faced with the possibilities to be trapped into the state of the bare life, which is the hard core of the radical political theory. Chinese scholars attempt to promote the exploration of the political ideas from the Chinese political thinking resources to resolve Agamben's theoretical dilemma. And Chinese scholars are committed to the pursuit of happiness for human beings under the background of the socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics.

Disputes in Translation and Common Understanding

Foucault's term "biopolitique" literally means "生物政治学" (biopolitics) in Chinese. However, Chinese scholars have two translations of "生物政治学" (biopolitics, literally in Chinese) and "生命政治学" (politics of life, literally in Chinese). Different translations reflect the fundamental differences in people's understanding of theoretical connotations and will have a profound impact on the orientation and development trend of theories.

If the word "biopolitique" is translated as "生物政治学" (biopolitics) in Chinese, there are two aspects to the understanding of "biopolitique" (Revel, 2015, p. 23). First of all, human lives no longer obey the laws of nature but the birth, aging, illness, death, health care, and reproduction of biological bodies are effectively managed by modern biological science. "Biopolitique" lays the foundation for the implementation of power and uses modern biological science to control the process of human life and the entire human life. Obviously, "biopolitique" is seen as the product of modernity, but when people are asked to review various disadvantages of modernity, they may idealize pre-modern period. Secondly, if "biopolitique" only concentrates on the organic life of a person, modern biological science will be regraded as the basis for the exercise of power. Chinese scholars who endorse the term "biopolitics" acknowledge the role of power, but insist that man is the owner of the biological body. Chinese scholars think that people can get rid of "biopolitique" and regain sovereignty over their biological body as long as they stay away from modern biological science. The translation of "biopolitics" makes it possible for human beings to exist out of power and control their own lives and destiny. So, the supporters of this translation focus on the connection between power and life and they are concerned about examining the disciplining of power on the body.

The translation of "生命政治学" (politics of life) emphasizes the capture of life and the production (reproduction) of the body exercised by the supreme power (Foucault, 2011). The proponents of this translation think that "biopolitique" is related to the political action throughout the whole history of human civilization. Modern politics endows it with rationality so that "biopolitique" can include all factors related to human life (such as the biological characteristics of people, etc.) into the political category. Modern forms of science, such as political economy and medicine, serve the needs of power and provide more advanced means for the exercise of power. So, the scholars revolve around the exploration of the control of power over the forms of life, including the decision on living and death of human being.

According to the understanding of "biopolitique", Chinese scholars think that the translation of "生命政治学" (politics of life) is more appropriate. First of all, it is necessary to clarify the differences between "生命" (life) and "生物" (living creature) in Chinese. "生物" (living creature) refers to those living things in nature

that have the ability to grow, develop, and reproduce. Animals, plants, and micro-organisms are all living creature. If the word “生物” (living creature) is applied to people, so people are the same organism as plants and animals in the existential way of the growth and development. But the word “生命” (life) means the very existence of a human being. Agamben traced back to Aristotle's distinction between *zoē* and *bios* in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*: the word *zoē*, “which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings”, and the word *bios*, “which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (Agamben, 1998, p. 4), and Aristotle associated the pursuit of good life with city-state politics. Agamben pointed out that the constitutive principle of biopolitics lies in the indivisible zone between individual life of human beings and the human community. It is in this indivisible zone that power arbitrarily delimits boundaries and achieves the purpose of disposing individual life of human beings at will by excluding individual life of human beings, which makes bare life. So, the Chinese word “生命” (life) is very similar to the meaning of *zoē* discussed by Aristotle and the concept of bare life in Agamben's biopolitics. The translation of “biopolitique” as “生命政治学” (politics of life) is closer to the research field of “biopolitique”.

In recent years, Chinese scholars have widely accepted the translation of “生命政治学” (politics of life) after in-depth studies of Foucault and Agamben. They recognize biopolitics uses modern biological science to control the organic life, but they realize the limitations of studying the living situation, social life, and cultural tradition at this level. They hope to investigate the essence of social practice and sort out its potential source of thought on a deeper and broader cultural and social level.

The Perspective of Biopolitics and the Revelation of the Crisis of Life

Chinese scholars have no intention to use Agamben's biopolitics as a set of instruments to diagnose the practices of biopolitics, nor do they agree with Agamben's views that power is the ontological principle that determines the ways that the world and things are presented. However, Agamben criticizes the containment on life imposed by Western culture and managerial apparatus, which provides the perspective of biopolitics for Chinese scholars to reflect on their own ideas, cultural tradition, and their own lives, and prompts them to explore the transformation of biopolitics.

Agamben introduces the structure of power to the world and things into people's critical vision. In fact, Foucault has done relevant research before, showing the collusion between power and knowledge. However, Agamben does not believe that power and knowledge are colluded, but emphasizes the construction of power in the field of knowledge. Power establishes conditions, scopes, and standards in the field of knowledge through the establishment of conditions, scopes, and standards in the field of non-knowledge. Power sets boundaries between non-knowledge and knowledge and makes judgments on non-knowledge and knowledge, that is, power can decide what knowledge is and what non-knowledge is. But the arbitrariness of power itself makes this line always in flux. Huang Xiaowu (2015) pointed out that Agamben regarded the setting of boundaries as the role played by power, and believed that power generated various opposing mechanisms in this way. In Agamben's opinion, power on life comes not only from a political party, a political group, or legal authority at the national level, but also from the various managerial apparatus exercised in the human society. Agamben's definition of managerial apparatus is quite extensive and Agamben regards all articles that people use in daily life as the managerial apparatus. Influenced by the radical theory, Chinese scholars are aware of the need to examine their own ideas. The distinction between the phenomena and the essence of metaphysics, the distinction between nature and grace, the distinction between the content and the form of the aesthetic, and so

on are the intersections of the studies of metaphysics, theology, aesthetics, etc. However, the hidden forces of the opposing mechanism in the discussion of the above opposition and the various themes have never been discussed. Agamben erects a stone of power in these opposing entrances. This means that power is functioning in the minds of human being if they form their ideas according to metaphysics, theology, and aesthetics. In the case of how to break the magic of power, Agamben suggests that people should reveal the governance factors hidden in things and stop the governance devices and make the power of the controlling devices lose its effectiveness. Agamben does not replace the old cultural form with a new cultural form, but rather emphasizes that people should maintain a reflective and critical attitude towards their own cultural traditions. Then, Chinese scholars gradually examine the intervention of power in the various opposing mechanisms and realize the necessities of reflecting on their own cultural traditions and reforming the new understanding of the world and the things.

Chinese scholars' researches on the Agamben's biopolitics are concerned with the situation of Chinese social development and directly pointed to the awareness and care of their own lives. In recent years, China's economy has grown rapidly and technology has made great progress, which provides people's lives with considerable material basis and reliable technical support. The prosperity of the economy and science and technology has greatly improved the quality of the life, but the prevalence of interests and the lack of scientific and technological ethics have caused people to feel uneasy. In addition, people are increasingly confused about their images. People have been able to keep their images in the media through modern technology, and learn about what is going on in their lives in the media. But what they see is a distorted image, and what they say is just repeating the voice of the media. They are eager to find out what kind of existence their life is, that is, it is a biological body subject to various external forces, or it is beyond the biological body and capable of maintaining its own existence. In the world of the media, they doubt whether they can see the true self and make the sound of their own. Chinese scholar's study of Agamben's biopolitics is relevant to their strong desire to transform biopolitics and protect their lives.

Agamben connects the occurrence of biopolitics with the Western cultural definition of man as a linguistic creature, and believes that this definition leads to the self-division of man which is the basis of sovereign power to govern people. Man divides himself and keeps in touch with his divided self in the hope of conquering his animality, but provides an opportunity for power to take over his life. Agamben's analysis provides a new critical approach for Chinese scholars. Western contemporary social critical thoughts, such as Frankfurt school, all discuss that the suppression of human beings by the capitalist machines causes the alienation and decline of human beings. But Agamben centers on the man's self-division in philosophical, political, and theological fields and his giving his right to life over to power. The subjection of man to the rule of power has much to do with his orientation to himself and his abandonment of the integrity of his life. Agamben then proposes that the human community, based on the man's self-division, sets various boundaries and obstacles to force individual life to give up its private space. The human community takes over people's lives, and the power and forms of controlling man are strengthened unprecedentedly. Agamben has deep concern for human life and proposes to abolish all kinds of boundaries and obstacles, prevent community life from occupying the living space of individual life, and safeguard the life right, freedom, and dignity of individual life. Under the influence of Agamben's thought, Chinese scholars try to explore new ways of experiencing the world and their own lives so as to recover the lost territory for their own lives. Lu Xinghua (2010) pointed out that "the vigorous and turbulent development of China in the last 30 years can also be seen as the process of the ancient country

finally being included in the global landscape of capitalism" (p. 30). The feature of Spectacle Society is that spectacle is above life and all the people suffer from it, but they have to maintain its existence. But Agamben insists that we should stay in the present, profane spectacle apparatus, and respond to the urgent problems at present. Lu Xinghua (2010) believed that the profanity advocated by Agamben is to call on people to explore the way of original experience. Agamben does not intend to find a kind of bursting force rescuing from the desperate situation, but to guide people to conduct original spirit and courage in the Spectacle Society.

The image of Agamben interpreted by Chinese scholars is a thinker who struggles with biopolitics and the society of spectacle full of managerial apparatus. In view of Chinese scholars, Agamben attempts to liberate language, thought and life from the tyranny of biopolitics and the apparatus of spectacles, returning them to human beings, and endowing them with the possibilities of conquering all kinds of apparatus and spectacles. Obviously, Chinese scholars have injected their thoughts about life and their own cultural appeal into the interpretation of Agamben.

Investigating the Ancient Is Identifying the Present: The Methodology of Agamben's Biopolitics

Chinese scholars believe the way that Agamben discusses things is not to analyze the concept of things, but to use the methods of philosophical archaeology and genealogy to indicate how things themselves are taking place.

Agamben analyzes the concept of "homo sacer", that is, the sacred man. The word "sacred" in the modern meaning means the dignity and inviolability of human life, but Agamben traces the original meaning of "sacred" in ancient times through archaeological methods. Human life is sacrificed to gods, so it can be killed at will. In this sense, human life is "sacred". Agamben went on to link the Massacres at Auschwitz with the "sacred man", believing that the violence that establishes political authorities forms the basis of the human community. Agamben's explanation of the living condition of people who may be reduced to bare life runs counter to the Western modern culture's claim that people are born with the rights of survival, freedom, equality, pursuit of happiness, and resistance to tyranny. Agamben changes his perspective and develops traditional research methods on cultural origin. He does not follow the patterns handed down through history, but reconstructs the historical origin and noumenal basis of things in the re-reading of historical documents, revealing the abyss that human life is encountering. In Chinese scholars' opinion, philosophical archaeology and genealogy interact with each other, so Agamben integrates them into a methodological whole. Thereby Agamben establishes the unity between researchers' cognitive activities characterized by transcendental configuration and the self-generation of historical research activities.

Chinese scholars believe that Agamben's archaeology and genealogy have changed the common view of knowledge. Knowledge is not a generalization of a phenomenon or an interpretation of a concept, but a study of things. But this kind of knowledge is not a matter of learning about the origin, occurrence, and development of things in the organic process which is a repetition or a complementary historical conclusion. Agamben has shown how the context of the structure of a thought or theory has been structured, revealing the undercurrent of power that plays a role in certain thoughts or theories through his unique philosophical research methodology. It is of significance that Agamben is trying to get real knowledge from his philosophical archaeology and genealogy and thus opposes power with knowledge in historical research.

Agamben emphasizes on exceptions and thresholds, and extracts some extreme historical phenomena into paradigms. Chinese scholars do not fully agree with this, but recognize the innovation of Agamben's research methods. Agamben analyzes the exceptions of regular rules, and reviews the construction mechanism of regular rules from the perspective of exceptions, highlighting the fundamental role of exceptions in regular rules, thus revealing the abnormality contained in regular rules. In addition, Agamben finds the threshold in people's habitual thinking process. Agamben starts from this threshold to investigate the forgotten or neglected fracture in people's thinking process. Agamben reverses regular rules by building individual historical images that are not universal into paradigms to interpret human history; to some extent, there is a lack of necessary historical basis and reliable theoretical basis. Agamben generalizes the exceptions by archaeology and genealogy as if ancient and modern times, totalitarian times, and democratic times share the same strategy. Perhaps in this way, Agamben helps people better understand the destruction of human life by the state of exception. While Agamben's amazing theory creates a historical sense of weightlessness, it also makes it difficult to confirm the credibility and reliability of Agamben's research methods. But Chinese scholars affirm Agamben's disintegration of totality structure mode and essentialist knowledge production mode. Agamben changes the research methods based on the principles of natural science and the mode of continuity according to the law of necessity of historical development. With the help of the unique research methods, Agamben shows the operative mechanism that power forms the total, incommensurable, and universal law, constructs the invisible, dominating essential principles, and then he promotes the people to constantly examine the threshold in their thinking and break through the barriers to their own thoughts.

Chinese scholars believe that Agamben's research methods are helpful for people to remove various regular rules that restrict their thinking and transform the general views of history requiring people to pursue ideal paradigms. For Chinese scholars, Agamben's methodology enables people to investigate the ancient in a way they have never done before. So, people are expected to have insightful perception about the truth that is not noticed or intentionally hidden to the extent that they can more clearly and accurately understand the present.

Criticizing and Promoting Agamben's Conception of Political Practice

Agamben's biopolitics, taking the totalitarian model of Auschwitz as an example, explains the process of Western political construction and points out that people living in the present have lost their sovereignty over their lives. In Agamben's opinion, Western democracy has not thoroughly reflected on the shadow of Western culture and cannot truly solve the problem of human survival crisis. Agamben puts forward the conception about "inoperative" and emphasizes on potential rather than action which seem to have been a form of inaction in political practice. Agamben strongly criticizes the political and economic development and ideology of the contemporary Western society, but he makes an attempt to resolve all the crises by making the managerial apparatus in the society "inoperative". From this, Chinese scholars distinguish and analyze the differences between Agamben and the contemporary radical left in the West. They notice the absence of political subject in Agamben's conception of political practice conception characteristic of making "inoperative". And they analyze in details Agamben's discussion on the concept of "people" and criticize his political practice conception of "inoperative". In addition, Chinese scholars do not stop at the interpretation of Agamben's thought, but go back to their own culture to find theoretical resources, and further explore the possibilities of political practice.

Chinese scholars affirm the critical attitude in Agamben's thought and put Agamben into the ranks of left-wing thinkers together with contemporary thinkers, such as Žižek and Badiou (Agamben, 1998), but they find that Agamben's thought is not completely consistent with the radical thought of the left (Han, 2016). For them, the characteristics of radical left are as follows: First, under the influence of contemporary cultural trends, such as post-structuralism and post-modernism, radical left transforms Marxism to be a comprehensive criticism of capitalist political and economic order. Second, the radical left opposes identity, determinism, and teleology, and advocates that the voice suppressed by the discourse and the rules of grand narrative should be liberated. Therefore, the radical left has the distinctive characteristics of overturning tradition and reconstructing theory. Third, radical left, who are mostly from European and American academia, has realistic consideration and strategic intention to cope with various crises in contemporary social life. They not only focus on the social situation and development of contemporary European and American countries, but also discuss the global issues faced by mankind, such as ideological criticism, the mixture of democracy and autocracy, and put forward the theoretical program of the communist assumption. Fourth, the radical left has the tendency of radical politics, such as Laclau's contention for the hegemony of discourse and Žižek's advocacy of the subtraction resistance. According to these characteristics, Chinese scholars feel that Agamben is not a radical left in the strict sense. It has been pointed out that Agamben's deviation from radical left is not only because Agamben's idea of "inoperative" is unrelated to the radical politics that radical left appeals to. Furthermore, Agamben shows the possibility that human being become bare life in the context of contemporary life, which reflects that Agamben does not agree with the revolutionary proposition of radical politics advocated by the radical left. Perhaps in Agamben's view, it is impossible for a man who is going to or is going to be bare life to be the subject of radical politics. Radical politics will always be an empty assumption if this knot of human existence cannot be broken. This means that Chinese scholars need to criticize the Western contemporary radical left and think about the political subject.

Chinese scholars realize the absence of the political subject in Agamben's political practice conception of "inoperative" and turn to the discussion of Agamben's concept of the people, and reveal the theoretical dilemma of Agamben's biopolitics. Chinese scholars have made a detailed analysis of Agamben's discussion on the concept of people, assuming that Agamben has no ideas of bridging the gaps between the People and the people (Agamben, 1996a). Agamben's political practice conception of "inoperative" is neither advocating a kind of passive inaction nor moving towards "inaction without action". Agamben had no illusions that there would be some kind of miracle or there would be some kind of power that would bounce back at the extreme and transform things. But Agamben has expected the failure of the managerial apparatus and the elimination of the segmentation structure of human community, he excluded the political subject from his conception of political practice; consequently his political practice conception will be just an idea eventually. Perhaps that is why there is always something apocalyptic about Agamben's hopes for the future.

Chinese scholars turn to the thinking resources in their own political culture to explore a better way to safeguard the people's right to life and realize their political rights to promote the development of Chinese contemporary society and respond to Agamben's theoretical dilemma. They think that the political thought of "mass line" pursued by Chinese Communist Party can eliminate the internal rupture of the concept of people and achieve the unity of the concept of people (Wu, 2014).

Agamben's biopolitics reveals various mechanisms of controlling of human body in the contemporary capitalist society and shows the destruction of life caused by modern Western politics while boasting the

promotion of democracy and freedom. But the more important significance of Agamben's biopolitics lies in the proposition of the necessity to create new political forms and human life styles which are the goals that Chinese people are striving for today.

Conclusion

Agamben insists on his political practice conception of "inoperative" and in this way he intends to suspend and invalidate biopolitics so as to return life to human beings. Agamben's biopolitics delineates the horror spectacle of human life on the edge of the abyss, which instead shows Agamben's urgent desire to defend the existence and dignity of human life. Agamben points out that human life is confronted with serious crisis because of the deviation of western modern culture from life. Modern western culture conceives of the subject according to Cartesian cogito, but separates life from human beings, making life isolated and uncertain, which leads to dislocation of epistemology, methodology and practice theory. Chinese scholars tend to think that Agamben strives to make people have a clearer understanding of the present and their own living conditions, push people to think more deeply about life, and inspire people to free human life from the spell of biopolitics. Chinese scholars have realized that China will pay more attention to the quality of human life and reflect on modernity in order to build a prosperous, democratic and happy contemporary country. It is based on the needs of China's contemporary social and cultural development that Chinese scholars critically study Agamben's thoughts and launch the unremitting theoretical exploration so that human beings can both possess and understand their own life.

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