



4-2013

The Abandonment of Modernity: Bare Life and the Camp in *Homo Sacer* and *Hotel Rwanda*

Carolyn Ownbey
McGill University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.22.05>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

Ownbey, Carolyn (2013) "The Abandonment of Modernity: Bare Life and the Camp in *Homo Sacer* and *Hotel Rwanda*," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 22 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.22.05>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol22/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com

**The Abandonment of Modernity:
Bare Life and the Camp in *Homo Sacer* and *Hotel Rwanda***
-Carolyn Owenby

In the introduction to his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben identifies as a starting point Foucault's concept of the biopolitical, of "the process by which, at the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power" (3), while at the same time he regrets the fact that Foucault "never dwelt on the exemplary places of modern biopolitics: the concentration camp and the structure of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century" (4). Picking up where he sees Foucault as leaving off, Agamben discusses not only sovereign power and the sovereign ban, the state of exception and the bare life that it necessarily produces, but also what he calls "the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (181), the camp. Over the course of the book, a political imperative surfaces: an injunction for the modern world—its subjects, its states, even its humanitarian organizations—to acknowledge the structure of exception which forms the framework of modernity, and to question this structure and its founding principles. The book draws on events of modern history, particularly those associated with Nazi Germany, "interrogat[ing] the link between bare life and politics, a link that secretly governs the modern ideologies seemingly most distant from one another," in an attempt to "bring the political out of its concealment" (4-5) and ultimately to encourage the development of a "completely new politics" (11). In this project, I will focus both on Agamben's text and on a text depicting another major biopolitical event in modern history—*Hotel Rwanda*, a film about the Rwandan genocide of 1994—to explore Agamben's claim that the state of exception has become the rule in modern nation-states, and to determine what, precisely, is at stake here.

In the realm of modern biopolitics (and therefore, Agamben argues, in the state of exception generally), the concept of citizenship assumes a position of particular importance. Agamben states that, "One of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics... is its constant need to redefine the threshold in life that distinguishes and separates what is inside and what is outside" (131). The distinction between who is a citizen and who is not becomes crucial, and all sorts of criteria for determining citizenship and, more importantly, non-citizenship arise. Using Nazi Germany as an example, Agamben explains that, "the answer to the question 'Who and what is German?' (and also, therefore, 'Who and what is not German?') coincides immediately with the highest political task" (130). Those who are deemed non-citizens, non-Germans here, are then excluded from the law, abandoned by it and rendered politically irrelevant. The same happens in *Hotel Rwanda*, where a group called the Interhamwe decides to distinguish citizenship on the basis of the categories of Hutu and Tutsi. The film reveals that these categories, established years prior by the Belgians, are essentially arbitrary: a foreign cameraman learns that the Belgians determined a person to be Hutu or Tutsi based on the length of their noses, but when he sees two women, one Hutu and one Tutsi, he says, "They could be twins" (14:19). In another instance in the film, Pat Archer, an aid worker for the Red Cross, tells protagonists Paul and Tatiana Rusesabagina that she was forced to watch as Tutsi orphans were killed. She recalls that, "There was one girl. She had her little sister wrapped on her back. As they're about to chop her, she cried out to me, 'please don't let them kill me! I—I promise I won't be Tutsi anymore!'" (47:28). The factors that determine citizenship here are outside of the individual's control. Agamben insists that in the state of exception there is, "a new decision concerning the threshold

beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant... and can as such be eliminated without punishment. Every society sets this limit; every society—even the most modern—decides who its ‘sacred men’ will be” (139).

In the film, the label “Tutsi” is enough to revoke a person’s citizenship, but at the same time, being a Hutu does not guarantee it, either. Agamben explains that, in the state of exception, “citizenship was something of which one had to prove oneself worthy and which could therefore always be called into question” (132). Throughout the film, Paul, himself a Hutu, must continually resist being reduced to his bare life and stripped of his citizenship, and the Hotel des Mille Collines here becomes a powerful symbol. Paul insists that, “This is not a refugee camp,” and he continues to call it a hotel and the people it shelters “guests,” even after 800 refugees have arrived (38:45, 60:22). Paul, who for the first half of the film is always dressed as a businessman, knows precisely what is at stake in maintaining himself as a citizen, a politically relevant person. Speaking to the hotel staff and to the refugees, he says, “Most importantly, this cannot be a refugee camp. The Interhamwe believe that the Mille Collines is a four-star Sabena hotel. That is the only thing keeping us alive” (65:43). Even for Paul, in the state of exception there is always a sense of danger: when one’s citizenship may be put up for debate and repealed at any moment, in some sense the law has already abandoned him. He has no appeal to the law if at once he is proclaimed not to belong.

Once a person is denied this belonging, Agamben insists, he fully represents the figure of the *homo sacer*. There are two attributes that together characterize the *homo sacer*: “*the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice*” (73, original emphasis). That is to say, any person who kills the *homo sacer* is not subject to punishment; this killing is not considered the crime of homicide. Simultaneously, the *homo sacer* is not sacrificed or killed through a legally prescribed procedure, such as the death penalty. The film’s Tutsi characters and those, like Paul, associated with them, are a clear example of *homo sacer*: none have been sentenced to death through legal means, but when the Interhamwe kill them, there is no recourse or punishment. In an early scene in the film, Paul, his wife Tatiana, and her brother Thomas look on as the army accuses their neighbor of being a Tutsi spy, beats him, and takes him away. Tatiana, horrified, insists that, “We must do something... Call someone.” Paul responds simply: “There is nothing we can do” (10:55). During the genocide in Rwanda, as Paul recognizes here, the people were utterly abandoned by the law. Paul and others taking refuge at the Hotel des Mille Collines do make calls of appeal later in the film—to foreigners and in Paul’s case also to General Bizimungu of the Rwandan army—and some help does come from these calls: select families are granted exit visas, the attacks on the Mille Collines are postponed. However, these events are always temporary, exclusionary; they come with a price and still are wrought with danger. There is no guarantee of safety for the *homo sacer*. When the exit visas are announced in the film by Colonel Oliver of the United Nations, the viewer feels a sense of relief, but there is simultaneously a sense of danger and hopelessness, for there are still more families left without aid. Even those families fortunate enough to be granted exit visas are not protected within the state of exception: the U.N. convoy bringing them to safety is driven into an ambush of Hutu militiamen.

The *homo sacer* stands outside the law, and is abandoned by it. Agamben calls the *homo sacer* “simply set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law” (82). The *homo sacer*, external to the law, still, however, remains intimately

bound to it. He does not simply have no relation to the law; he relates to the law precisely through his exclusion from it. Agamben explains this as the sovereign ban of the homo sacer from the sovereign sphere—in other words, as the state of exception. He says, “The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion)” (181). Being excluded from the law, the homo sacer cannot appeal to the law; it cannot protect him. His banishment from the sphere of law reduces him—from a politically relevant person, a citizen protected by the law and within the law—to his bare life alone. As such, as a creature possessing bare life only, the homo sacer may become subject to death or punishment at the hands of anyone. Agamben explains that in the state of exception, “human life is politicized only through an abandonment to an unconditional power of death” (90). Using the example of the Jew in Nazi Germany, Agamben identifies, “a flagrant case of *homo sacer* in the sense of a life that may be killed but not sacrificed. His killing therefore constitutes... neither capital punishment nor a sacrifice, but simply the actualization of a mere ‘capacity to be killed’” (114). The Jew in Nazi Germany demonstrates exactly those two traits Agamben has told us are always present in the homo sacer: his ability to be killed without being the victim of homicide, and his inability to be sacrificed. Agamben continues, saying, “The truth... is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, ‘as lice,’ which is to say, as bare life” (114). In the same way, the exterminating Hutus, particularly the group called the Interhamwe, call the Tutsis “cockroaches” (00:52). The homo sacer no longer signifies anything beyond his bare life; he has no political relevance but for his mere existence outside the law, banished from the law, abandoned by it. Agamben explains,

“The life caught in the sovereign ban is the life that is originally sacred... and, in this sense, the production of bare life is the originary activity of sovereignty. The sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure in the relation of abandonment” (83).

Being abandoned by the law, and as such being reduced to bare life, does not necessarily indicate that the abandoned sovereign subject, the homo sacer, will be tortured, murdered, or the like (although this is not out of the realm of possibility, and indeed there always seems to be a sense of danger haunting the homo sacer). It simply means the law no longer applies; the homo sacer cannot appeal to anyone for help, not to the law, the sovereign, or the police.

Hotel Rwanda demonstrates what is at stake for the individual when he is reduced to bare life and made into homo sacer. It depicts the danger and the horrors that can exist in a state of exception, when law withdraws and abandons the individual. What Agamben’s book further shows is how the structure of the state of exception is already at work in the dominant structure of modernity, and how the modern subject, despite whatever appearances may seem otherwise, is always already homo sacer. Agamben makes several assertions about declarations of rights, democracy, and humanitarian organizations that, at first, seem contradictory or paradoxical. However, it is through these assertions that the reader can decipher the political imperative of the book. To begin, Agamben discusses declarations of rights, declarations that the modern subject often takes for granted as liberating, empowering, and protecting the individual. Agamben makes it clear that this

understanding of these declarations entirely miss what is going on here. He asserts that, “it is time to stop regarding declarations of rights as proclamations of eternal, metajudicial values binding the legislator (in fact, without much success) to respect eternal ethical principles, and to begin to consider them according to their real historical function in the modern nation-state. Declarations of rights represent the originary figure of the inscription of natural life in the juridico-political order of the nation-state” (127).

Declarations of rights, Agamben contends, rather than freeing individuals from state power and control, more and more write them into the law. Perhaps the best example of this comes in Agamben’s discussion of the right of *habeas corpus*. Intended to “assure the presence of the accused at the trial and, therefore, to keep the accused from avoiding judgment” (125), *habeas corpus* also has another, more subversive effect. Because it writes the body into the law—despite its ostensible purpose of protecting that body—the institution of *habeas corpus* makes the body subject to the law more than it was before. Agamben says that *habeas corpus* “turns—in its new and definitive form—into grounds for the sheriff to detain and exhibit the body of the accused” (125).

Using this same logic, Agamben turns to a discussion of democratic and totalitarian states, revealing what to the modern subject seems to be an unsettling solidarity between the two. He speaks of the rapidity “with which this century’s totalitarian states were able to be converted, almost without interruption, into parliamentary democracies” (122). The most unsettling aspect of this scenario is the fact that the switch happens “almost without interruption,” and so the modern subject must question exactly how different democracy and totalitarianism are, really. The reason for this “otherwise incomprehensible rapidity” (122) is precisely what Agamben explained concerning declarations of rights: the institution of ‘rights’ in democratic states also inscribes the subject more and more within the law and the state’s power. Agamben explains that, “the spaces, the liberties, and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals’ lives within the state order” (121). Democratic states, then, while advertising themselves as different from their totalitarian counterparts, as granting freedom to their citizens, really operate precisely like the totalitarian states do—capturing, albeit covertly, the lives and bodies of the individuals within their power.

Revealing another perhaps shocking solidarity in the modern world, Agamben moves on to take issue with the structure of humanitarian organizations. Where the modern subject ordinarily conceives of humanitarian organizations as in opposition to oppressive state power, Agamben reveals a secret complicity. He says that these organizations, “can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight” (133). Because humanitarian organizations refuse to take political actions, because they simply cater to the bare life (and not the political existence) of the individual—clothing and feeding people—Agamben insists that they operate “in perfect symmetry with state power” (133), perpetuating the structure of the state of exception instead of questioning and fighting it. In *Hotel Rwanda*, the character of Colonel Oliver demonstrates this problem over and over again. When a U.N. convoy is attacked, an Interhamwe Hutu yells at Colonel Oliver, “Look, I told you, you’ve got cockroaches in your truck!” The colonel responds, saying, “No, no, no. They’re political refugees under U.N. sanction” (92:21). What the colonel does not

realize is that here, still within the confines of Rwanda and in the state of exception, they are nothing more than bare life, more cockroaches than they are political refugees, in that they can simply be exterminated. At another point in the film, Colonel Oliver tells a journalist, “We’re here as peace keepers, not peace makers. My orders are not to intervene” (37:53). Even when the Interhamwe have killed several of the U.N.’s own soldiers, the men who guard the gate of the Mille Collines are not allowed to shoot. Agamben, in response to this sort of ineffectual aid given by humanitarian organizations (indeed, why bother to feed them if they will die by machete in a day or two?), makes a statement that indicates the political imperative here. He says, “A humanitarianism separated from politics cannot fail to reproduce the isolation of sacred life at the basis of sovereignty, and the camp—which is to say, the pure space of exception—is the biopolitical paradigm that it cannot master” (134). Separating out bare life, no matter for what purpose, creates and perpetuates the state of exception, the camp; in order to affect change, modern subjects must question the fundamental structure of these humanitarian organizations, of democracies and totalitarianisms. In order to master this biopolitical paradigm of the camp, which is also the biopolitical paradigm of modernity, bare life can no longer be isolated.

Agamben ultimately argues, as the title of his book’s third and final section indicates, that “The Camp [is the] Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern.” Agamben explains—and texts like the film *Hotel Rwanda* demonstrate—precisely what is at stake in the state of exception, in the camp: the individual is reduced to his bare life, becoming homo sacer, and he is abandoned by the law; in this state, he is left vulnerable, without appeal, to the most horrifying violations and to the most gruesome death. The supposedly liberating and protecting institutions of democracy and humanitarian organizations are ineffectual (in the film: the U.N.’s inability to protect the refugees, the refusal of military aid by the world’s leading Western democracies—the U.S., Britain, France), and they operate in symmetry and ultimately in complicity with oppressive totalitarian state powers. The film highlights how horrifying it is that modern subjects, particularly in the West, witness such atrocities, and do not act, through the words of the American photographer: “I think, if people see this footage [of the Rwandan massacres], they’ll say, ‘oh my God, that’s horrible,’ and then go on eating their dinners” (44:05). At the same, however, time the film’s relatively happy ending allows the viewer to do precisely that. Agamben’s book, however, threatens its readers with the fate of the homo sacer, charges them to “learn to recognize” the “metamorphoses and disguises” (123) of the camp in the modern world, and also warns us that “There is no return from the camps to classical politics” (188). *Homo Sacer*, then, is a text which forces its readers to rethink what they understand as political, free, democratic, etc., and to try—and it is imperative that they do—to find a new political relation, one which does not operate as a state of exception, and which does not, most importantly, produce the figure of homo sacer. As he asserts in his book’s introduction, “until a completely new politics – that is, a politics no longer founded on the *exceptio* of bare life – is at hand, every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile, and the ‘beautiful day’ of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it” (11).

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans: Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998. 199 pp.

Hotel Rwanda. Dir. Terry George. Miracle Pictures/Seamus, 2005. Film.