

**Revisiting Foucault through Reading Agamben:  
Implications for Workplace Subjectification, Desubjectification  
and the Dark Side of Organizations**

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## **Abstract**

Questions of subjectivity have been a central concern in organization studies (OS) – and the subfield of critical management studies (CMS) – at least since the late 1980s. Despite differences, existing approaches to subjectivity have one thing in common: a theoretical interest in the construction and reproduction of subjectivity, that is, subjectification. However, to our knowledge, no study within OS and CMS has explicitly focused on desubjectification – processes of breaking free from subject positions. This is perhaps an effect of the lack of such research in general social sciences and philosophy. This paper aims to address this gap in OS and CMS by conceptualizing subjectivity as being produced through a dialectical process of subjectification and desubjectification.

The theoretical discussion of the paper is particularly based on the works of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. Subjectivity here is seen as the result of both subjectification and desubjectification. The former refers to the subject positions that organizational actors move towards while the latter is understood as the subject positions they break free from. To us, the discourse/knowledge nexus frames these processes since it defines accepted and illegitimate subject positions (those one should strive towards and those one should break free from).

In the paper, we first recapitulate the Foucauldian conceptualization of subjectivity and discuss Foucault's marginal but nevertheless existing interest in desubjectification. Thereafter we introduce the work of Giorgio Agamben and contextualize his work within a biopolitical resurgence in the social sciences and humanities today. In a fourth section, a tentative conceptual framework of organizational subjectivity is laid out. We then turn to a discussion centering on how a reading of Agamben may contribute to the understanding of the dark side of organization. In the conclusion, possible implications for OS and the 'reconnection' of CMS are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Subjectivity has been a central theme in organization studies (OS) – and the subfield of critical management studies (CMS) – at least since the late 1980s (Knights and Willmott, 1989; O’Doherty and Willmott, 2001). Beyond their differences, existing approaches to subjectivity within OS and CMS clearly have one thing in common: a theoretical interest in the construction and reproduction of subjectivity, that is, subjectification. On the other hand, desubjectification – processes of diminishment and destruction of subjectivity – has been alluded to in previous research (see Covalleski et al., 1998; Goffman, 1961; Townley, 1994; Van Maanen, 1975) but without explicitly using the term. This indicates the importance of understanding, studying and conceptualizing desubjectification but it also makes clear that desubjectification lacks explicit treatment within OS and CMS. This is perhaps an effect of the lack of such research in mainstream general social sciences and philosophy (Pippin, 2005; Seigel, 2005). The present paper aims to address this gap in organization studies by framing subjectivity as a dialectical process, pending between subjectification and desubjectification.

The theoretical discussion of the present paper is particularly based on the works of Michel Foucault and the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Taking our point of departure in Foucault’s work on subjectivity is reasonable since the articulation of subjectivity within organization studies has largely been founded on the works of Foucault (e.g. 1977, 1981). Since Foucault only refers to subjectification in his articulation of subjectivity, the understanding and studies of subjectivity within the boundaries of OS and CMS have focused on processes of subjectification. However, the reading of Foucault that we present in this paper shows that Foucault also implicitly included a notion of desubjectification in his studies of subjectivity. In order to make this notion explicit, we draw on the works of Giorgio Agamben, certainly one of the contemporary philosophers that have made the most important elaborations on Foucault’s work, especially regarding Foucault’s conceptualizations of biopolitics and subjectivity (see e.g. Mills, 2005). By introducing these elaborations from Agamben into OS and CMS, we wish to outline a framework for studying subjectivity. In this framework subjectivity is understood as a dialectic between processes of subjectification and desubjectification. The former is defined as the subject positions organizational members move towards and the latter is understood as the subject positions organizational members break free from. This framework and our more general review of the work of Agamben also lead us to suggest new ways of studying the dark side of organization – or the ‘heart of darkness’, as Clegg et al. (2006) put it. Traditionally, OS and CMS have had surprisingly little to say on the organization and management of ‘total institutions’ as extrapolated techniques and tendencies that exist in normal organizations as well (Clegg et al., 2006). The contribution of Agamben, not only his dialectical understanding of subjectivity but also his work in general, invites further scrutinizing on this issue. This implies, however, that some of the critique of his work is attended to, and adjusted to fit with a social science framework that for instance stresses the importance of context and agency.

After this introduction, we first recapitulate the Foucauldian conceptualization of subjectivity and discuss Foucault’s marginal but nevertheless existing interest in desubjectification. Thereafter we introduce the work of Giorgio Agamben and contextualize his work within a biopolitical resurgence in the social sciences and humanities today. In a fourth section, a tentative conceptual framework of organizational subjectivity is laid out. We then turn to a discussion centering on how a reading of Agamben may contribute to the understanding of the dark side of organization. In the conclusion, possible implications for OS and the ‘reconnection’ of CMS are discussed.

## 2. The Foucauldian Conceptualization of Subjectivity

The Foucauldian analysis of workplace subjectivity (e.g. Bergström and Knights, 2006; Covaleski et al., 1998; Knights and McCabe, 1999; Townley, 1993) has been preoccupied with subjectification, that is, with what a subject position has to offer in terms of new ways of thinking, behaving and feeling. Empirical research has accordingly focused on what a person becomes when entering a new subject position. But analyses of workplace subjectivity have not systematically focused on ways of thinking, behaving and feeling that are incongruent with a particular subject position. Empirical research has thus not focused on which abilities a person takes a critical attitude towards and leaves behind and how this empowers the process of transformation of subjectivity. This is understandable. Particularly if the analysis is based upon Foucault's work on power (Foucault, 1977, 1981), since what he was interested in then, was the process of subjectification in discourse and power/knowledge. He thus did not have much use of a notion of desubjectification. Later though, in his work on ethics (Foucault, 1985a, 1985b), desubjectification came to take a more central role. The process of self-making, which he primarily focused upon then, requires as its condition a kind of desubjectification in taking a critical attitude toward, or breaking from, the discourses and norms by which one is made a subject. Even though Foucault did never articulate a notion of desubjectification it is thus possible to trace an implicit such notion in his works on ethics. Therefore this later stage in Foucault's work is reviewed here but it must be kept in mind that one should not overestimate the general magnitude of the shift of focus in Foucault's work.

Perceiving subjectivity as an effect of regimes of power/knowledge has been a common theme in empirical studies (Ogbonna and Harris, 2002; Knights and McCabe, 1999) and theoretical conceptualizations (Knights and Willmott, 1989; Townley, 1993) inspired by Foucault within OS and CMS. The 'technology of the self' mediating production of subjectivity is the confession and confessing is the activity that people engage in when changing themselves. Through confessing, people ransack their behaviour, thinking and emotions by comparing themselves with the legitimate norms and ethics provided by power/knowledge, and seek to change themselves in order to accord with and/or have their self-making inspired by this power/knowledge (Foucault, 1985a, 1997; Townley, 1998). Change is manifested in the speech through avowal. Confessional speech will thus not only serve as a device of control for who the person is but also as an indicator for who s/he becomes. Subjection works '...through the promotion and calculated regulation of spaces in which choice is to be exercised' (Dean, 1995: 562), which is often facilitated by producing knowledge that suits particular ends.

But the role given to power/knowledge and how power/knowledge operates in the confession has varied in Foucault's work. A shift in the role given to power/knowledge is illustrated in Foucault's work on the discourse of sexuality in 19<sup>th</sup> century Christianity and in classical Greece. In the former context a certain sexual behavior is analyzed as demanded and determined by discourse (heterosexuality) and another as strictly forbidden (homosexuality) (see Foucault, 1981). In the latter context Foucault (1985a) understands sexual ethics as used to create a sexual style without stipulating an exact subject position: what is central is to diminish and control excess, not to abolish it completely, and to use it as a force in creating the self. This means that the confession in Christianity aims to create conformity with norms and to forbid certain behaviors, thoughts and feelings. In Classical Greece the confession involves a constant struggle for developing moderation but does not involve conforming to certain norms. Constituting oneself as a human being during classical Greece thus involved a

constant struggle between wrong, risky, dangerous and right, safe, secure, emotions, cognitions or behavior and to find the right balance, referred to as ‘stylization’ (Foucault, 1985ab) between them – subjectivity is explicitly understood as an ethical project in this case. In Classical Greece ‘...what constituted ethical negativity par excellence was clearly not the loving of both sexes, nor was it the preferring of one’s own sex over the other; it consisted in being passive with regard to the pleasures’ (Foucault, 1985a: 85-86) in general (not only sexual pleasures). The differentiation between an *active* and *passive* style towards the self is at the center of ethical problematization, not the abolishment of pleasure. Accordingly, discourse does not determine subjectivity (Dean, 1999). Rather, people construct themselves by choosing ways of actively governing themselves. Consequently, it is the active curbing of pleasures that is demanded by a moral human being, but there are many ways to be moral, as exemplified by Foucault:

If the regimen of pleasures was important, this was not simply because excess might lead to an illness; it was because in sexual activity in general man’s mastery, strength and life were at stake. To give this activity the rarefied and stylized form of a regimen was to ensure oneself against future ills; it was also to form exercise, and prove oneself an individual capable of controlling his violence and of allowing it to operate within appropriate limits, of keeping the source of his energy within himself... (Foucault, 1985a: 125-126).

We argue that having an active attitude in the self-making requires a constant pending between keeping a critical attitude towards potential dimensions of the subject – such as violence – and to orientate the self in new directions. We perceive this as dialectic between desubjectification and subjectification. It is important to note (Foucault is not very clear on this) that the former gets its strength and energy from the latter: desubjectification serves as a mirror for subjectification and vice versa. We thus see it as possible to argue that Foucault (1985a) implicitly postulated a constant oscillation between desubjectification and subjectification in his conceptualization of subjectivity.

### **3. Agamben and the Biopolitical**

Recently transcribed and translated lectures of Foucault (especially Foucault, 2003a), Hardt and Negri’s influential work on Empire and the Multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004), Derrida’s ‘ethical turn’ (beginning with Derrida, 1994) and texts by Carl Schmitt (see primarily Schmitt, 1985) are all intellectual works that have laid foundation for the notion of biopolitics. The interest in this notion has steadily increased in the social sciences the last five years or so (Rabinow and Rose, 2006). This escalated engagement in biopolitics is primarily due to tendencies in world politics and social affairs, such as the ‘war on terror’ after 11/9, and harsher immigration- and asylum policies in many European countries and other parts of the world, such as Australia. Giorgio Agamben is, however, perhaps the one who today asks the most fundamental and disturbing questions regarding the metaphysics of power and the human subject within the genealogy of biopolitical theoreticians like Foucault and Arendt (Borislavov, 2005). His *Homo Sacer* project radicalizes Foucault’s notion of biopolitics as the fabric of everyday reality in advanced capitalist societies today (Gregory, 2004; Marks, 2006) and his *oeuvre* is applicable to organization and management studies as it is a story of the indifferenciability of – and in its continuation, organization and management of – power relationships (Kieslow, 2005). Our approach harmonizes here with the statement by Clegg et al. (2006: 2): ‘We cannot enquire into power without an enquiry into its organization. Equally, we cannot make serious enquiry into organizations without an enquiry into power’.

As a philosopher, Agamben has been active since the late 1970s with a focus on the philosophy of aesthetics and language (Agamben, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1995). Living in Paris as a member of the diaspora community of Italian political philosophers, his work gradually became coloured by the violent antagonism in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s. As a consequence, political theory has step by step become pivotal in his work, starting with the original publication of ‘The Coming Community’ (1993c) in 1990 (Bolt, 2003; Franchi, 2004). Agamben’s work is often complex and multi-layered and written in a European philosophical tradition, in an episodic mode where different sections are superimposed one upon another as if they simultaneously occupied the same space (Wall, 1999: 121). In *Homo Sacer* (Agamben, 1998), his most well-known work to date, his primary ambition is to reveal the true and original nature of power and the politics of sovereignty.

Agamben departs from the conservative philosopher Carl Schmitt’s theory on sovereignty and the exception (Schmitt, 1985). For Schmitt, the sovereign is whoever can decide on and proclaim a state of exception, being the constituting power outside the constituted power (simultaneously inside and outside the juridical order). For Agamben, this implies that sovereign power is defined not so much by the capability to create, but by the capability to suspend law and order. This exception reveals itself as a kind of exclusion, in the form of the sovereign’s suspension, that is, an inclusive exclusion (Agamben, 1998). This inclusive exclusion describes the ontological foundation of Western metaphysics, and in its continuation, modern political power (Bernstein, 2004). The original political relation, the relation of exception, is the relation of the ban – *abandonment* (Agamben, 1998: 29) with a topology more complex than the inclusion-exclusion divide (Pratt, 2005). The relation of the ban is constituted by thresholds or zones of indifference, where the concepts of inside and outside become blurred (Agamben, 2005).

Following Benjamin’s treatise on the bearer on the link between violence and law, the figure of bare life (Benjamin, 1978), Agamben asks: ‘who is the bearer of the sovereign ban?’ (Agamben, 1998: 67) and answers by discussing what he sees as the primary example of inclusive exclusion in classical Western politics: the separation of the biological and political aspects of life, that is, *zoē* (the biological fact of living) and *bio* (the way of living proper to an individual or a group) (Agamben, 1998: 1, 2000). Here, *zoē*, confined to the *oikos*, became at the same time included through exclusion from the *polis*, and bare life is produced. In other words, bare life is a distinct modality of existence in which *zoē* is politicized, through abandonment, in the zone of indifference or indistinction (Hussain and Ptacek, 2000). Going back to the Roman grammarian Pompeius Festus’s notion of a figure of archaic Roman law, Agamben labels the inhabitant of the zone of indistinction *homo sacer*. *Homo sacer* is in Agamben’s line of thought, a figure that it is possible to kill without punishment (since the act of killing does not count as homicide) but forbidden to be sacrificed (being unworthy to be sacred to the gods). *Homo sacer*, like an outlawed, is expelled from society but still within the grasp of (violent) power, abandoned through an inclusive exclusion. And, since the original relation is the ban, the original figure or subject is consequently *homo sacer*, rather than the (included) citizen or organizational member or the (excluded) foreigner or non-member. The fundamental activity of (sovereign) power is the biopolitical production of *homo sacer*, bare life (Agamben, 1998).

This, in turn, suggests two conclusions, first, that the time of appearance for biopolitics has to be questioned. Foucault’s claim that politics became biopolitics first during the modern era has to be corrected. Agamben’s sympathetic critique of Foucault, here, simultaneously

implies a radicalization of the thesis on biopolitics (Gregory, 2004). The sovereigns' politics is inherently biopolitics, whether the era is premodern, modern or postmodern. Secondly, all human beings are potentially *homines sacri* as they can be reducible through a suspension of their ontological status as subjects (Butler, 2004). For Agamben, *homo sacer* is more than a figure in legal philosophy in ancient Rome. *Homo sacer* is also a subject to repeating materializations in history, as the history of the oppressed informs us (Dean, 2004). Today, Agamben suggests, life is exposed to sovereign violence without precedent 'in the most profane and banal ways' (Agamben, 1998: 114), and the politicization of life has reached such an extent that the state of exception comes increasingly to the foreground as the fundamental political structure in society.

In his ambition to radicalize the notion of biopolitics, Agamben combines the conclusions of Foucault (who did not explicitly discuss concentrations camps) and Arendt's treatise on totalitarianism (Arendt, 1951). To Agamben, following Arendt, there is a point of contact between mass democracies and totalitarian states. They both build their power on bare life (in the state of exception democracy closes itself upon totalitarianism [Ball, 2005]) and are therefore confronted by the same question: which form of organization is the most appropriate regarding the task of assuring the care, control and use of bare life (Agamben, 1998). Sovereignty could here be defined as the power to determine, manage, the disinterested non-decision to continue or discontinue bare life, a silent managerial processing (van der Walt, 2005). Organization is not a citadel of order, but a threshold where people pass from order to disorder and from disorder to order. Consequently, there is primarily a difference of degree between excluding a person from an organization on the one hand and 'holding him or her in a camp on the other' (ten Bos, 2005: 18-19).

The camp as an organizational principle<sup>1</sup> reveals itself as an appropriate form, a pure biopolitical space of modernity, as the *nomos* or modernity and of the earth. The original camp is colonial (Campbell, 2002), born out of a state of exception and martial law. Through colonial management, Western sovereign states became involved in the differentiation and categorization of people where one form of life is perceived as a threat to another form of life, imagined as 'society' (Foucault, 2003a: 254-255). Soon, the sovereign begins to look inwards for enemies from whom society must be defended. The separation of life continues as an internal racism 'whose function is not so much the prejudice or defence of one group against another as the detection of all those within a group who may be the carriers of a danger to it' (Foucault, 2003b: 317).

Thus, the camp is the management technology best suited to the production of bare life, on the threshold, where sovereign power constantly has the capacity to abandon its subjects (Diken and Laustsen, 2005a). When the logic of the camp becomes more widespread in society, the production of bare life is extended beyond the physical or geographical camp. The camp replaces polis as the contemporary biopolitical paradigm (a paradigm in Kuhn's [1962] second meaning of the word, that is, as a single phenomenon functioning as an example or a model). The camps not only become camps for the disadvantaged, but for the advantaged as well, as for instance gated communities and other solipsistic urban enclaves for the wealthy (Diken, 2004). Therefore, we repeatedly find ourselves in the presence of the camp (as in campuses), whether or not degradation and desubjectification take place there. The most extreme form of the camp is, of course, the concentration camp, and in Agamben's line of

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<sup>1</sup> More or less manifested and materialized spatially as geographical camps, it is in its spatial and material form that it finds its most potent expression (Minca, 2005).

thought, the *muselmann* is the most extreme figure of the camp inhabitant, the exemplary case of bare life. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* (Agamben, 2002), the *muselmann* is described as the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum and the moving threshold between man and non-man<sup>2</sup>, humanity and non-humanity. It is in connection with the *muselmann* as a product of absolute power that Agamben explicitly discusses desubjectification.

#### 4. A Conceptual Framework of Organizational Subjectivity<sup>3</sup>

Agamben, as the later Foucault, sees subjectivity as an ethical project. Agamben also accepts Foucault's idea that the confession or the self-examination is the generic technology for creation of subjectivity. When writing about subjectivity Agamben thus constantly refers to expressions such as 'examine yourself', 'avowal', 'confession' and 'disavowal', terms that we are familiar with from the readings of Foucault. However, unlike Foucault, Agamben does not focus on the technologies of subjectivity per se, but rather on the substance of subjectivity formation, which he believes to be an ethical project. As we see it there is a great difference between the 'ethical Foucault' and the 'ethical Agamben'. In his last two books on the history of sexuality Foucault (1985a, 1985b) analyzed how, in classical Greece and the Roman Empire, humans subjectified themselves through problematizing themselves in relation to the prevalent ethic. But Foucault did not articulate a new ethic in order to understand subjectivity. On the other hand, this is central to Agamben's project and we believe that such an articulation is necessary if we really should understand how persons turn themselves into subjects through confessions within the context of modernity and the modern organization in particular.

Agamben (2002) outlines his ethics in connection to his theory of subjectivity in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, based on a reading of texts from the survivors of the death camps, primarily Primo Levi (1988). The reason for this point of departure is that Agamben, through an exposition of the limits of existing ethical paradigms, regards all of them as impossible after the concentration camp. For Agamben, ethical categories such as dignity, guilt and respect, break down in the confrontation with the living dead, the *muselmann*. The ethics that remains after Auschwitz is an ethics of testimony, the witnessing of the horror of the inhuman surviving the human (Ziarek, 2003). In this sense, *Remnants of Auschwitz* is an account of ethical response to the absolute separation of human life from inhuman survival that biopower, through the organization of camps, aims at (Vogt, 2005).

To Agamben, being human is conditioned by an indefinite potentiality for being inhuman, and the distinction between being human and inhuman is itself an unstable constitution (Mills, 2005), 'Man' is neither a biologically defined species or a given substance, but rather a field of dialectical tensions (Agamben, 2004: 12). This notion repeats the distinction between *bios* and *zoē* elaborated upon above, and the *muselmann* becomes the limit-figure of the human and inhuman (Mills, 2005: 200) and a generic model of the subject (Marion, 2006). This fracturing of the human is further worked upon in his account of subjectification, (a crucial moral-philosophical detour in Agamben's political-philosophical *Homo Sacer* – project). Subjectification, the production of consciousness in the event of discourse repeatedly

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<sup>2</sup> to Agamben, *homo sacer* and *muselmann* is always a 'man', something that has been criticized from a gender perspective, see further Asibong (2003) and Sanchez (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Besides reading Agamben on the experience of desubjectification, we have in this section been informed by primarily Mills, 2003, but also Mills 2005; Faye, 2003; Ziarek, 2003; Bernstein, 2004; Davis, 2004; Diken and Laustsen, 2005; Moore, 2005; Vogt, 2005; Marion 2006; Chare 2006.



crumbles and erases itself, and brings to light the constitutive desubjectification in every subjectification (Agamben, 2002: 123). Subjectification rests on the distinction between the human as a speaking being and the inhuman as a living being (Mills, 2005: 202).

‘Agamben’s account of subjectivation...emerges through theorization of two interrelated existential modalities, the first affective and the second linguistic’ (Mills 2003:13). When it comes to the former modality, Agamben takes his point of departure in the fact that *shame* (the constitutive affective tonality of subjectivity and the hidden structure of all subjectivity and consciousness; see Agamben, 2002: 128; Mills, 2005: 202-203) is a central theme in the accounts of those who survived the concentration camp. Agamben shows that many of the survivors couple their shame to *guilt*; they see themselves as guilty of having survived; guilty for not being sent to the gas chamber; guilty for living in place of another person, etc. The survivors argue that this feeling of guilt that according to them is dominant in shame is central to their constitution of subjectivity, since they are guilty about themselves as subjects. Shame and the guilt that operate within it is a reflexive feeling. Agamben agrees that shame is central to subjectivity but believes at the same time that it is not guilt that is central to shame. It is rather *intimacy* and it is this latter feeling that makes shame so central for subjectivity. By elaborating on Levinas, Agamben (2002: 104-105) re-articulates the meaning of shame:

According to Levinas, shame does not derive...from the consciousness of an imperfection or a lack in our being from which we take distance. On the contrary, shame is grounded in our being’s incapacity to move away and break free from itself. If we experience shame in nudity, it is because we cannot hide what we would like to remove from the field of vision; it is because the unrestrainable impulse to flee from oneself is confronted by an equally certain impossibility of evasion.

Quoting Levinas, Agamben (2002: 105) continues: ‘What is shameful is our intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves. It reveals not our nothingness but the totality of our existence...what shame discovers is the Being that discovers himself’. Through the intimacy that is central to the feeling of shame that operates in the confession, people discover themselves as subjects. Shame is thus not only a sentiment among others. Rather shame has an ontological status for the social human being. Shame is reflexive vis-à-vis subjectivity. But this reflexivity is dialectical. It suggests ways of fleeing from subjectivity – desubjectification – but also ways for producing subjectivity – subjectification – since in shame the I is more present than ever. Thus, shame produces a situation where ways away from a subjectivity flourish but at the same time all these ways away also designate ways to a subjectivity. According to Agamben subjectification and desubjectification are part of the same process, they are always present in every dimension of subjectivity. Therefore, in shame, subjectification and desubjectification are intertwined in a dialectical process that constitutes subjectivity.

This affective conception of shame is extended to a linguistic analysis of pronouns as grammatical shifters. Central to this analysis is Agamben’s argument that a person’s articulation about his or her own subjectivity is ‘an occasion for shame and the double movement of subjectification and desubjectification it entails’ (Mills, 2003: 14). In Agamben’s view grammatical shifters and pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘me’ have no reference to a reality outside themselves.<sup>4</sup> They are linguistic signs that enable the speaker to appropriate

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<sup>4</sup> For Agamben language is out-of-the-body experiences since a gap prevents ‘me’ from coinciding with the ‘I’ that I say or write. In this fissure, the breathing living being and the speaking and writing being

and make use of language, but in order to become the subject of enunciation, the individual must preclude her/himself as the agent of speech (Mills, 2005: 204):

For Agamben, the appropriation of language as an enunciative taking place of language indicates the double movement of subjectification and desubjectification that marks the relation of the subject to the language in which it speaks and thus appears. That is, the appropriation of language requires that the psychosomatic individual erase or desubjectify itself as an individual in its identification with the grammatical shifters that indicate the taking place of enunciation in order to become the subject of the enunciation. (Mills, 2003:15)

In a tentative way, we would argue that a reading of Agamben, like the one above, could be used in several ways to elaborate on the Foucauldian analysis of workplace subjectivity. **Firstly**, Agamben directs our attention towards feelings that operate in the confession, that of shame and intimacy. It is through feeling ashamed and by avowing this that persons turn themselves into subjects. The experience of shame and intimacy becomes not only ‘feelings’, but affects that could be understood as a form of thinking, a kind of intelligence of the world and ‘a set of embodied practices that produce visible conducts as an outer lining’ (Thrift, 2004: 60). **Secondly**, through the introduction of desubjectification and the relationship between subjectification and desubjectification we can get a better understanding of how workplace subjectivity is formed. When people appropriate a new subject position this is not only driven by a processes of subjectification and the ‘adding’ of new settings of power/knowledge etc. but also through getting rid of a number of values, behaviours, imaginations, etc. We need to stop thinking about the shaping of workplace subjectivity as modeled on the process of primary socialization based as it is in the modernistic discourse of progress. It may be a good idea to see primary socialization as adding new abilities to the child, but even the child loses abilities during socialization. In workplace subjectivity such desubjectification is much more common but we have not been able to analyze it systematically simply because we have lacked concepts for doing so – it has been outside our discourse on workplace subjectivity and therefore we have been unable to talk about it (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). **Thirdly**, processes of subjectification and desubjectification are engaged in a dialectical relationship and fuel each other. We thus need to examine processes of both subjectification and desubjectification in order to fully understand formations of subjectivity. For example, moving towards a culture of enterprise does not only imply that people get more active (Clark and Newman 1997; Dean 1995; du Gay and Salaman 1992) as students of organizations have argued. It also implies that people move away from a passive subject position and it is this moving away from passivity that gives impetus to the movement towards activity and vice versa. **Fourthly** and finally, through articulating a notion of desubjectification the analysis of workplace subjectivity will be better suited to articulate a social critique of organizations. Through a better understanding of what organizations take away from people, it will be possible to articulate a critique – lacking but urgently needed – in studies of workplace subjectivity. As Agamben observes, subjectification implies the notion of powerlessness, self-loss, servitude and the exposure of the subject’s own disorder (Moore, 2005). This is quite a negative depiction, but it also calls for a renewed interest in the possibilities of emancipation and empowerment in a workplace context (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). In this way the work of Agamben, and his understanding of subjectivity in

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never coincide and language therefore institutes a gap between speech and silence, between *bios* and *zōē* (Chare, 2006).

particular, can help improve our understanding of the dark side of organization, a question that we now turn to.

## 5. Understanding the Dark Side of Organization

Clegg et al. (2006: 29-30) argue that in the heart of power exists a darkness that has been etiolated in accounts of power in OS, with the exception of some studies that have directed attention to the mechanisms of total institutions (like Goffman, 1961; Milgram, 1974). Organization studies have had little to say about the Holocaust, as if the extremes of organizational behaviour and power were of marginal interest rather than something that could show what could be achieved by the management and organization of resources, people and ideas (Clegg et al., 2006: 30). Neglecting the claim that the Holocaust was an uninteresting anomaly in the modern organization of power, Clegg et al. (2006) argue that total institutions are a concentration and condensation of technologies of power generically inherent in every form of organization. As a methodological consequence, the extreme case extrapolates and visualizes dangers inherent in normalcy (Clegg et al., 2006: 21). The extreme case demonstrates that ‘...taken-for-granted assumptions are not some deviation from normal but regular, albeit unpredictable, occurrences’ (Clegg et al., 2006: 143).

Thereafter Clegg et al. (2006) discuss Goffman and Foucault, and especially Goffman’s concept of ‘total institutions’. Total institutions are institutions that surround the subject at every turn in seemingly not escapable ways and ‘contain the totality of the lives of those who are their members’ (Clegg et al., 2006: 147). The extreme possibility for transformation of the self that is subject to abasement and humiliation is based on the possibilities of total institutions to withdraw the material and social resources that usually support the organizational subject. This is only manageable through organizational rationality and efficiency, what Bauman has argued made the Holocaust possible (Bauman, 1989). Following this, Clegg et al. (2006: 166-176) give examples on total institutions (Magdalene Laundries, original peoples in Australia, the German Democratic Republic and Abu Ghraib). All these cases work well as illustrations of the biopolitical production of bare lives. There is, however (and surprisingly), not one reference to Agamben in this ambitious and most engaging book on *Power and Organizations*.

Agamben’s seemingly radical notion that the camp has become the biopolitical paradigm of the West and the *nomos* of the Earth has been criticized very much in the same vein as Bauman’s work on the Holocaust and from the same argumentation point that has rendered possible the conclusion that the Holocaust is of marginal interest for OS. This all goes down to the question of the relationship between the nomothetic and the idiographic and the question whether the broader social preconditions and the mechanisms of the Nazi regime should be treated as indices of modernity or an inevitable outcome of the logic of modernity and capitalism (Turner, 2005). At the same time, Agamben’s methodology concurs with Clegg et al.’s argument regarding the dark side of organization – that through an investigation of the extreme it is possible to say something about the regular or general – even if, in Agamben’s case, it is done in perhaps an overly dramatic and prophetic way (ten Bos, 2005).

We would therefore argue that through a systematic use of Agamben’s texts, it is possible to theoretically nuance an excavation into the dark side of organizational power.<sup>5</sup> Elaborating upon his thesis on subjectification and desubjectification is one way to make this excavation

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<sup>5</sup> We do not, however, have the space here to develop this thought to the extent that it deserves.

(as this paper has tried to lay out). The breaking apart of the double articulation of subjectification and desubjectification in Agamben's work is a result of biopolitical machinations taking place in the space of the camps: '...subjectification is installed in the place of desubjectification and the impossibility of speaking, that is, the reduction of the human or the speaking being to the living being, the inhuman' (Mills, 2003: 17). Agamben here points to an aspect of the most significant total institutions of the twentieth century that Foucault missed: 'Their means have been overwhelmingly violent, based upon confinement against the will of those subject to it, and abuse of the dignity and bodies of those confined' (Clegg et al, 2006: 147).

However, Agamben approaches this issue as a philosopher, not a social scientist, and consequently, the *Homo Sacer* – project lacks a more systematic account of the forces, interests, struggles, strategies and actors involved in the production of biopolitics: 'He does not differentiate among various forms and modalities of political power and overlooks instances of mediation. By disregarding the distinct aspects of political power, politics is relegated to a single, pejorative version of sovereign power and state authority' (Kalyvas, 2005: 115). Consequently, Agamben evinces a tension between the ontological aspects of biopower as the fundament of organizational power and the physical and factual existence of specific power regimes, with the result that despite a 'breathtaking historical sweep, the biopolitical paradigm displays a marked loss of specificity in its analyses of contemporary biopolitical phenomena' (Sinnerbrink, 2005: 258). This is something that has to be attended to in an investigation of the dark side of organizational power influenced by Agamben's continental philosophy, since power cannot be conceptualized as wholly abstracted from those contexts in which it is embedded (Clegg et al., 2006: 17).

Another aspect that needs further notification is the fact that, at least in a literal reading, Agamben's thinking is dualistic, perhaps since he reads Foucault structurally rather than genealogically (Neal, 2006). There is no in-between being *homo sacer* or potential *homo sacer*. As critics have pointed out, the relation between *homo sacer* and sovereign or organizational power should be less stable and solid than Agamben suggests (Long, 2006) and the figure of naked life (sometimes romanticized in messianic tones) should be de-simplified (Tyler, 2006). Agamben's absolutist depiction of power, formalized in the notion of the camp as a sealed and homogeneous enclosure, also needs attention since there is no relational spatiality of absolute isolation. 'No human interaction can remain devoid of meaning and value. Although the camp is designed as the place in which such distinctions are suspended, it also produces its own counter-responses. It inspires resistance and it leaks' (Papastergiadis, 2006: 438, cp. Clegg et al.'s discussion on GDR, 2006: 172-175). Keeping these limitations in the applicability of Agamben's ideas to a social science context in mind, we still want to stress that a cautious translation of Agamben's thought into theoretical tools that may be of use within OS and CMS looks highly promising to us in terms of the insights it can provide for examining organizational phenomena.

## **5. Conclusion: Implications for OS, and Reconnecting CMS**

The study of extremes is important for organization science...The point of looking at extreme cases is to see normal phenomena in a condensed and concentrated form, especially as these normal phenomena center on the person in the institution. (Clegg et al., 2006: 143)

Understanding workplace subjectivity as a result of processes of subjectification and desubjectification matters if OS and CMS are to develop a critique of forms of alienation and outline possibilities of emancipation in contemporary organizational contexts. In the increasingly precarious settings that characterize many organizations around the world, the condensation and concentration of 'normal phenomena' may lead to rather extreme cases of subjectification and desubjectification. Conceptualizing further the dark side of organization thus becomes critical for the potential of critique within OS and CMS, and we believe that Agamben's works can inform such a conceptualization in important ways: his understanding of extreme cases of subjectivity formation, in particular, can provide insights into 'normal' processes of subjectification and desubjectification within organizations. But as the study of the normal can be informed by an understanding of the extreme, reconnecting what have become 'normal' organizational phenomena to broader economic, political and social processes is also needed in a world where the exception is becoming the norm. Importing more readings of Agamben into CMS may precisely address the need to develop a critique of management that examines both micro-organizational phenomena and the new global division of labour, and connects one to the other by acknowledging how the contemporary dynamics of neoliberal globalization result in 'spaces of exception' emerging all over the world (e.g. Diken and Laustsen, 2005a) and further exploitation of people and natural resources in all kinds of societies. However, while calling for Agamben's work to be given more consideration within OS and CMS, we also need to stress how the translation of philosophical ideas into usable theoretical tools in a social science context should always be handled with much care and humility.

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