

# “Biosecurity and Politics” By Giorgio Agamben<sup>1</sup>

What is striking about the reactions to the emergency measures that have been put into place in our country (and not only there) is the inability to observe those measures outside of the immediate context in which they seem to operate. Rare are those who, on the contrary, in accordance with the necessity of a serious political analysis, try to interpret them as the symptoms and signs of a much larger experiment in which a new paradigm of governing people and things is in play.

In *Tempêtes microbiennes* (Gallimard, 2013),<sup>2</sup> a book published seven years ago, and certainly worth attentive rereading today, Patrick Zylberman<sup>3</sup> described the process by which health security, which had previously remained at the margins of political calculations, was becoming an essential part of governmental and international political strategies. In question was nothing less than the creation of a kind of “health terror” as an instrument of governing in the aftermath of what is defined as the *worst case scenario*.<sup>4</sup> It was according to this logic of the worst that, back in 2005, the World Health Organization announced “two to 150 millions deaths due to the forthcoming advent of Avian bird flu,” which suggested a political strategy that the States were still not prepared to accept. Zylberman showed that the measures that were suggested could be separated into three points: 1) the construction – on the basis of a possible risk – of a fictitious scenario in which the data is presented in a manner that favors behaviors that allow governing in extreme situations; 2) the adoption of the logic of the worst as the regime of political rationality; and 3) the complete organization of the citizenry as a body in a way that reinforces the maximum adherence to the institutions of government, by producing a kind of superlative civic-mindedness in which the imposed obligations are presented as proofs of altruism and the citizen [as an individual] no longer has the right to health (*health safety*)<sup>5</sup> but must become legally obligated to health (*biosecurity*).<sup>6</sup>

What Zylberman described in 2013 is exactly verified today. It is obvious that, beyond the emergency situation linked to a certain virus, which may in the future be replaced by another one, what is in question is the designing of a governmental paradigm whose efficiency far surpasses that of all the other forms of government that the political history of the West has

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Biosicurezza e politica*, published by *Quodlibet* on 11 May 2020. Translated into French by Florence Balique as “Biosécurité et politique,” published in *Lundi Matin* #243 on 18 May 2020. Translated from French into English by NOT BORED! on 18 May 2020. All footnotes by the translator, except where noted.

<sup>2</sup> Not yet translated into English.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Patrick Zylberman, “Coronavirus : ‘Une mise en quarantaine est inefficace’ selon l’historien de la santé Patrick Zylberman,” published on 24 January 2020 by France Inter (French only):

<https://www.franceinter.fr/societe/coronavirus-une-mise-en-quarantaine-est-inefficace-selon-l-historien-de-la-sante-patrick-zylberman>.

<sup>4</sup> English in original.

<sup>5</sup> English in original.

<sup>6</sup> English in original.

known until today. If security concerns, in the midst of the progressive decline of political ideologies and beliefs, have already forced citizens to accept previously unacceptable limitations of their liberties, biosecurity has shown itself capable of presenting the absolute cessation of all political activity and all social relations as the maximal form of civic participation. Thus we have seen the paradox of leftist organizations, which have traditionally been accustomed to claiming rights and denouncing violations of the Constitution, unreservedly accepting the limitations of liberties decided upon by ministerial decrees that are lacking all legality and that even fascism never dreamed of being able to impose.

It is obvious – and the governmental authorities themselves don't stop recalling this to us – that what is called “social distancing” will become the model of the politics that awaits us and that (as announced by the representatives of the “*task force*,”<sup>7</sup> whose members have obvious conflicts of interest with the functions that they must exercise) we will benefit from this distancing by substituting for all human relations in their physical dimensions, which have become suspect of permitting contagion (political contagion, that is), digital technological measures. As already recommended by the MIUR,<sup>8</sup> university classes, starting next year, will be regularly conducted online, and so we will no longer recognize each other by looking at each other's faces, which could well be covered by health masks, but thanks to digital devices that will recognize the biological data that has been compulsorily collected, and [furthermore] any “gathering,” whether organized for reasons of politics or simple friendship, will continue to be prohibited.

What's in question here is the entire conception of the destiny of human society in a perspective that, in many aspects, seems to have taken from the various declining religions the apocalyptic idea of the end of the world. After politics has been replaced by the economy, in order to govern, the economy itself will be integrated into the new paradigm of biosecurity, to which every other exigency must be sacrificed. It is legitimate to wonder if such a society could still be defined as human or if the loss of sensual relations [*rapporti sensibili*], faces, friendship and love can truly be compensated by an abstract health security that can be presumed to be entirely fictitious.

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<sup>7</sup> English in original.

<sup>8</sup> *Note by French translator or publisher*: the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research.