


Inoperativity as a form of Refusal: On Bonnie Honig's Reading of Agamben

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to follow Honig's intention of thinking inoperativity as a form of refusal. It demonstrates that Agamben's inoperativity entails an intensification of use that can circumvent the pitfalls associated with the language of 'demands,' or the need to rescue the city as the space of the political par excellence, all while preserving its potential for instituting change. I claim that all destitution entails instituting practices and forms of experimentation that modify the subject, and that, with the help of Agamben, subjects are nothing other than these modifications. The wager of this short intervention, therefore, is that a form of refusal that pays critical attention not only to the act of suspension or negation, but also to the generative force that this suspension inherently entails is attainable, all while circumventing the city as a political space shaped by anti-blackness.

Keywords: Bonnie Honig; Refusal; Agamben: Inoperativity; Use; Profanation

[ES] La inoperatividad como forma de rechazo: Sobre la lectura que Bonnie Honig hace de Agamben

Resumen. El objetivo de este artículo es seguir la intención de Honig de pensar la inoperatividad como una forma de rechazo. Demuestra que la inoperatividad de Agamben conlleva una intensificación del uso que puede sortear los escollos asociados al lenguaje de las "demandas", o la necesidad de rescatar la ciudad como el espacio de lo político por excelencia, preservando al mismo tiempo su potencial para instituir el cambio. Afirmino que toda destitución involucra prácticas instituyentes y formas de experimentación que modifican al sujeto, y que, con la ayuda de Agamben, los sujetos no son otra cosa que esas modificaciones. La apuesta de esta breve intervención, por tanto, es que es concebible, para Agamben, una forma de rechazo que preste atención crítica no sólo al acto de suspensión o negación, sino también a la fuerza generativa que esta suspensión conlleva inherentemente, todo ello eludiendo la ciudad como espacio político configurado por la antinegritud.

Palabras clave: Bonnie Honig; rechazo; Agamben; Inoperatividad; Uso; profanación

Sumario. 1. Agamben's Inoperativity as an intensification of Use. Bibliography.

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To flee is not to renounce action: nothing is more active than a flight. Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*¹

At first glance, the politics of refusal may seem paradoxical, as it appears to conflict with the prevailing narrative of the constitutive character of politics, "generally understood to be all about engagement, intervention in real-life issues, a struggle over the manifold

ways in which to organise society, about agency and direct action"². Honig's feminist articulation of refusal, Agamben's notion of inoperativity, and the category of fugitivity – both in its Afropessimist and black optimist tonalities – challenge this understanding of the political, which is incapable of thinking fugitivity, suspension, and play as anything but forms of depoliticisation.

¹ G. Deleuze and C. Parnet, *Dialogues II*, Columbia University Press; revised edition, 2007, p. 36.

² P. Hesselbert, and J. Bloois (eds.), *The Politics of Withdrawal*, Roman & Littlefield, Lanham, 2020, p. 1.

Indeed, as the editors of *The Politics of Withdrawal* reminds us, withdrawal – and we can add refusal –, is not a “retreat into passivity. Withdrawal emphasises and increases antagonism, but it does so [...] by displacing the terms in which antagonism is conceived –that is to say: no longer in terms of the struggle for recognition in the public arena”³. It should be said, however, that inoperativity and refusal go beyond withdrawal and entail a new instituting praxis, or as Agamben puts it, a new common use.

Far from providing a blueprint for political emancipation or a prescribed formula for political intervention, the task of inoperative politics is to pay critical attention to these moments of refusal and to their productive, generative force. Crucially, refusal, as Moten suggests, is a refusal of what has been refused: it is not about the right to have rights, but the rights to refuse rights, to refuse the terms on which they are offered or the terms in which they have to be claimed and assumed.⁴ Refusal, therefore, is first and foremost a refusal of have been denied⁵: citizenship, transcendental subjectivity, the notion of the human, the idea of the city, and ultimately the politics of recognition: “to refuse what is normatively desired and to claim what is normatively disavowed is our lot, our anteperformative repertoire”⁶, says Moten. Refusal always unfolds through improvisation, it intensifies and augments the possibilities of political action while refusing to speak the language of recognition, so dear to the Western political tradition. It is not a demand for a chance, it is taking our own chances.

The aim of this short piece is to follow Honig’s intention of thinking inoperativity as a form of refusal. I do so with a very modest aim in mind: to demonstrate that Agamben’s inoperativity entails an intensification of use that can circumvent the pitfalls associated with the language of “demands”, or the need to rescue the city as the space of the political par excellence, all while preserving its potential for instituting change. I claim that all destitution entails instituting practices and forms of experimentation that modify the subject, and that, with the help of Agamben, subjects are nothing other than these modifications. The wager of this short intervention, therefore, is that a form of refusal that pays critical attention not only to the suspension but also to the intensification of use that this suspension inherently entails is attainable, all while acknowledging that the city is shaped by anti-blackness. After all, who would like to return and attempt to transform a city that the black critical tradition has proved to be unchangeable and exclusionary by design? This realisation, however, does not imply a form of passivity. On the contrary, it signals a proliferation of means, it forces us to listen to black noise, and to develop a language capable of grasping practices of resistance that refuse the terms in which intervention in the so-called “political” should take place.

More precisely, I claim that the limitations of inoperativity as a category of refusal outlined by Honig only show the failure of Bartleby (as an example) to do

justice to the theoretical development of inoperativity in Agamben’s works, and in particular in his sustained attempt to develop this concept in *The Use of Bodies*. In doing that, I will respond to the main criticism levelled against Agamben’s notion of inoperativity by Honig, according to which Agamben favours the suspension of use as such, and that therefore, his notion of inoperativity leads to inaction and passivity. I do so in order to show that a more constructive reading of Agamben and one that could potentially contribute to the feminist politics of refusal that Honig has in mind is possible. The aim is not simply to provide a different reading of Agamben to demonstrate the similarities between his project and the feminist take on refusal provided by Honig. More precisely, the claim is that Agamben’s notion of inoperativity augments and intensifies refusal through forms of experimentation that go beyond returning to a city with a set of radical demands, which could be crucial for a feminist account of refusal.

Honig begins her retrieval of inoperativity with Agamben because, for her, “his work has inspired what [she] think[s] of as the Bartleby Left, for whom refusal is an end in itself, and Melville’s Bartleby is a hero.”⁷ This approach to refusal, according to Honig, renounces any destination other than the act of refusal itself, making it vulnerable to charges of aestheticism, purism, or passivity. Honig herself makes these charges, through a reading of Agamben’s notion of inoperativity that privileges his examples (or paradigms, as he puts it) of inoperativity as an interpretative key, over the more substantial and rich elaboration of refusal that Agamben develops in *The Use of Bodies*.

This apparent passivity found in Agamben’s notion of inoperativity is contrasted by Honig with her depiction of refusal as an arc, which “conveys a normative, civic, and feminist obligation to risk the impurities of politics on behalf of transformation.”⁸ For Honig, transformation requires a return to the city with a set of demands, not its abandonment. However, in a brief but crucial passage, Honig recognizes that this “return to the city” may not serve the needs of indigenous and black critical theorists and practitioners of refusal, for whom the city is unsalvageable. Nor does it satisfy Agamben’s politics of pure means, which, as Honig suggests, rejects “instrumental and teleological approaches to ethics or politics.”⁹ However, I claim that this does not mean that Agamben’s category of inoperativity renounces transformation. On the contrary, I argue that Agamben’s concept of inoperativity implies experimentation, improvisation, and an intensification of use, it implies precisely taking risks to live otherwise and to render the city, which has turned into a camp, inoperative. It refuses the call for an intervention that takes the form of demands but understands transformation as the very means of refusal. Yet, according to Honig,

[t]he purism of Agamben’s version of inoperativity is evident when he locates all his examples of inoperativity in exceptional, liminal

³ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁴ F. Moten, *Stolen Life*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2018, p. 243.

⁵ Cf. W.D. Hart, *The blackness of Black*, Lexicon Books, Lanham, 2020, p. 162.

⁶ F. Moten, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

⁷ B. Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge - Massachusetts, 2021, p. 14.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

times and spaces: outside the city or in the time or space of festival or resurrection, on the verge, threshold, or precipice of (in)action. Festival, exception, precipice, and exhibition are central to his effort to refuse means-ends politics and modernity's conversion of everything into use, accelerated under contemporary neoliberal capitalism.¹⁰

For Honig, a feminist approach to inoperativity “leads us to prioritize action on behalf of equality over what Agamben favors: the suspension of use, as such. Or better, we insist that the suspension of use is part of a larger arc of refusal”¹¹. In order to develop such a reading, Honig claims that inoperativity should take its bearings not from Agamben's example of *Bartleby* but from the *Bacchae*:

[t]he play is well-served by an inoperativity reading, as the women's Dionysian festivities inspire them to refuse unproductive work and to abandon conventional norms of sex-gender (unreproductive). However, in this Greek tragedy, inoperativity is not merely the suspension of use; it also involves, more significantly, the intensification of use.¹²

One of the problems with Agamben's notion of inoperativity for Honig is that it is underpinned by spectacle and exhibition, which is “countered by the bacchants, who have their own critique of exhibition and reason to suspect that spectacle invariably carries the male gaze”¹³. In this sense, Honig's account of refusal appears to be one step ahead of Agamben's inoperativity, since it goes beyond a mere suspension of use to posit a new use, or as she puts it, it constitutes an intensification of use. This is precisely what the first chapter of *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* aims to demonstrate – the limits of inoperativity as a refusal concept, replacing *Bartleby* with the *Bacchae*, and moving us from “suspension to intensification, from faith in the neutralizing powers of exhibition to the agonistic empowerments of experience”¹⁴.

Nevertheless, we should remember that, as it has been claimed by Sergie Prozorov, “*Bartleby* certainly is a subject of inoperative politics, yet this does not mean that its other subjects resemble or must resemble *Bartleby*” and therefore “the question is simply whether this hyperbolic example succeeds in its function of elucidating a wider ensemble of subjects and practices or stands alone as an extreme case whose extension to the wider domain is controversial or outright dubious”¹⁵. Interestingly, Honig also recognises the insufficiencies of this particular paradigm to elucidate the complexity of Agamben's politics of inoperativity:

Melville's character is removed from key components of inoperativity as theorized by Agamben himself. Agamben says inoperativity involves not only the suspension of use

(evacuating signifying systems, or undoing the law) but also the generation of “new use” (new nonutilitarian ways of doing something like what was once done); specifically, Agamben says in *Nudities*, inoperativity is “new use in common”¹⁶.

Yet, despite noticing this crucial point, Honig constructs an understanding of Agamben's notion of inoperativity by privileging this extreme example alone, or, to put it differently, she takes the failure of this particular example to elucidate Agamben's own theorisation of inoperativity as a failure of Agamben's account of inoperativity in itself. More importantly, the depth of Agamben's exploration of inoperativity becomes evident only after his meticulous reexamination of the concept of “use,” as it emerges in *The Use of Bodies*, a work that follows his commentary on *Bartleby*.

1. Agamben's Inoperativity as an Intensification of Use

As Giovanni Marmont and I have claimed elsewhere,¹⁷ the Italian philosopher's formulation of *inoperosità*, has been frequently misconstrued, and at times outright dismissed, as indicating simple inactivity, as a form of passivity and utter absence of all labour, likened to an absolute Batallean negativity. It is perhaps in the postscript to the 2001 edition of *La comunità che viene*, titled *Tiqqun de la noche*, that we can find the author's most incisive, pithy elaboration on the concept. Agamben writes:

The crucial question is not “what to do?”, but “how to do?”, and Being is less important than the “like-so”. Inoperativity does not mean inertia, but *katargesis* – that is to say, an operation in which the *how* completely substitutes the *what*, in which the *life* without form and the forms without life coincide in a *form of life*¹⁸

Inoperative politics, for Agamben, does not embrace inaction or passivity, and it certainly does not stop at the suspension of use. It forces us to rethink action, use and intervention in forms that neutralise the productive force governing them. Here, as Honig suggests, the rethinking of the concept of *Use* becomes a central element of inoperativity. In *The State of Exception* Agamben begins a reformulation of the concept of use with reference to Walter Benjamin's reading of Kafka. The general coordinates of this text contain the seeds for his critique and reappropriation of the concept of use which is then further developed in *The Highest Poverty* and *The Use of Bodies*. In a well-known but crucial, telling passage, Agamben writes that:

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. What is found after the law is not a more proper and original use

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 15-16.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

¹⁵ S. Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2014, p. 53.

¹⁶ B. Honig, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

¹⁷ G. Marmont, and G. Primera, “Propositions for Inoperative Life”, *The Journal of Italian Philosophy*, Vol 3, 2020, p. 10.

¹⁸ A. Giorgio, *La comunità che viene*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2001, p. 93, in G. Marmont, G and G. Primera, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

value that precedes the law, but a new use that is born only after it. And use, which has been contaminated by law, must also be freed from its own value. This liberation is the task of study, or of play. And this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin's posthumous fragments defines as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical.¹⁹

The notion of use is here freed from its utilitarian connotation. To use is to liberate an object, to suspend its economy, to render it inoperative. What is decisive, however, is that for Agamben use does not only refer to a subject that uses an object, but also to "an object that constitutes itself only through the using, the being in relation with another".²⁰ In this sense, the notion of use is closely linked to the subject: through the reformulation of use Agamben seeks to produce a "radical transformation of the ontology (an ontology of the middle voice) of the concept of "subject".²¹ What does this mean for Agamben's politics of inoperativity? This has two fundamental implications. On the ontological level, it means that man cannot be defined in terms of a praxis (*energeia*) or in terms of a work (*ergon*) but only as *potenza*, as *argos*, as inoperative. On the political level, it implies that this inoperativity imposes the task of suspending all human and divine works, *but only* in order to open them to a new possible use, and hence the "corresponding political concept can no longer be that of constituent power but something that could be called destituent power".²² However, destitution only takes place through this use devoid of the means-ends rationality, it entails active modes of engagement, play and a form of sociality that is generative through and through. For this reason, Agamben's notion of suspension is not a withdrawal. On the contrary, for Agamben, thinking against Aristotle and the tradition that follows after him, is equivalent to returning use "to the dimension of habit, but of a habit that, insofar as it happens as habitual use and is therefore always already in use, does not presuppose a potential that must at a certain point pass into the act or be put to work".²³ What is at stake here is the anti-ontological character of improvisation that underlie all acts of refusal. The fundamental question for the political and philosophical inquiry into inoperativity is whether it is possible to think the generative, improper, and fugitive nature of the politics of refusal outside the dialectic between constituent power and constituted power. In this oscillation between instituting practice and institution, inoperativity, as understood by Agamben, urges us to see these social practices as indeterminate. The political character of these practices does not lie in their being destined for *the polis* as a form of interruption, as they are, above all, a refusal of the forms of intelligibility that determine what counts as political in the first place.

This is why, in *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben says that "Use is the form in which habit is given existence, beyond the simple opposition between potential and being-at-work".²⁴ Crucially then, the formulation of habitual use as a paradigm of inoperativity imparts a crucial spin to the reading of Agamben that only highlights the act of suspension as part of inoperativity.²⁵ To quote Agamben himself, inoperativity does not mean inertia or simple absence of works but a totally other relation to them. The work is not the result or achievement of a potential, which is realized and consumed in it: the work is that in which potential and habit are still present, still in use; it is the dwelling of habit, which does not stop appearing and, as it were, dancing in it, ceaselessly reopening it to a new, possible use.²⁶

It is clear, then, that that inoperativity is not just the cessation of all activity but a suspension that cannot be reabsorbed by the figures of negation and identity, nor can it be reincorporated into a politics of constituent power. This is also where Agamben's thought diverges, for instance, from the "anti-work" espoused by other intellectuals linked to the Italian *Autonomia*, such as Antonio Negri, Berardi, and Mario Tronti.²⁷ Rather than depicting a passive suspension of labour, we can argue that in Agamben inoperativity suspends the very coordinates within which "suspension" as a political mechanism itself takes place. In so doing, it calls into question the strategies that seek transformation by using "the master's tools," that is, the established modes of engagement based on the politics of recognition.

The "suspension of the suspension" to which Agamben refers in the *The Open*, is a critique of the traditional ways in which the revolutionary tradition and liberal reformism have imagined transformation. Inoperative politics in this sense, comes close to what Roberto Esposito defines as instituting praxis, "it leaves behind both progressive historicism and the revolutionary tradition of ex nihilo creation: nothing is born from nothing, but every institution can also radically modify the context in which it is inscribed and the subjects that put it into action".²⁸ This also means that the spatial metaphor of inside/outside the city does not fully capture the act of refusal that is constitutive of inoperativity. Indeed, as Giovanni Marmont and I have claimed, we should take inoperativity as an observable tonality that can be spotted around us, in processes and phenomena of various kinds, whenever we are attentive enough to notice it, thus using this concept as something of an analytic lens.²⁹ Framing inoperativity this way, striving to see the inoperative gesture in existing practices, we are reminded of an invaluable admonition by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, not unlike their notion of "study", inoperativity is "important precisely because it is not special".³⁰

¹⁹ A. Giorgio, *State of Exception*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2005, p. 64.

²⁰ A. Giorgio, *The Use of Bodies*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2016, p. 69.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 70.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 60.

²⁵ V. Bonaci, "Form-of-life and Use in Homo Sacer", *The Journal of Italian Philosophy*, Vol 3, 2020, p. 240.

²⁶ G. Agamben, 2016, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

²⁷ Cf., G. Marmont and G. Primera, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²⁸ R. Esposito, *Institution*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2022, p. 97.

²⁹ G. Marmont, and G. Primera, *op. cit.*, p.133.

³⁰ H. Stefano, and F. Moten, "When We Are Apart We Are Not Alone: A conversation with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney" (interview by Zach Ngjin, Sara Van Horn, and Alex Westfall),

This means that if equality and justice imply a politics, however, the form it should take raises a difficulty. Indeed, because of its anti-prescriptive character, inoperative politics cannot coherently provide a normative blueprint for political action, as this would constitute a contradiction with its own destituent potential. This is why, for Prozorov, “politics need not take the form of (yet another) historical project but rather consists in one’s subtraction from the apparatuses that govern us and the identities that they prescribe, rendering them inoperative and in this manner reclaiming our own inoperativity.”³¹ Indeed, inoperative politics forces us to think the very nature of the relation between theory and praxis in order to find new strategies for political action. Needless to say, within the normative political tradition, theory appears as the founding ground of political action, which in turns legitimates and is legitimated by a particular politico-ontological stance. Rather, Agamben’s notion of inoperativity dislocates the point of contact between praxis and theory, its task is, as suggested by Abbott, “not to unify theory and practice but to find a praxis of *theoria*: a politics that follows up on the consequences of the worklessness at the heart of human life, and the empty centre of the “double machine” of Kingdom and Government, theology and economy, being and acting”³². In this sense, politics and method coincide in Agamben’s notion of inoperativity. Let us remember that Agamben’s philosophical archaeology is an attempt at rendering the machines that control the intelligibility of the West inoperative by revealing and suspending their moments of arising, in order to restore to common use what has been captured in them. This new, common does not presuppose a foundational, constituent power trapped in the mythic circle of violence. If to constituent power there correspond a form of violence that posits a new law and perpetuates sovereignty through revolts and revolutions, “for destituent potential it is necessary to think entirely different strategies, whose definition is the task of the coming politics. A power that has only been knocked down with a constituent violence will resurge in another form, in the unceasing, unwinnable, desolate dialectic between constituent power and constituted power”.³³

The politics of inoperativity, in this sense, is not an attempt to re-order the city so that it can recognise our demands. The political question is not that of the inclusion of the excluded into the city, but rather to render the biopolitical structure of differentiation between inclusion and exclusion inoperative. This differentiation is the very foundation of the city. This is why Agamben turns to play and not to the spectacle. Instead of spectacle, Agamben’s inoperativity functions through profanation, it aims at suspending the metaphysical structure of the sacred and the profane, not falling back into their logic to redirect their effects, but exposing the contingency of their

articulation, following the goal of a philosophical archaeology worthy of its name. Profanation and play entail an intensification of use. They only come about through practices of experimentation and play. We need to pay critical attention to this generative force without normatively defining it in advance. As a form of refusal, inoperative practices might be illegible within the normative schemas of political theory that they simultaneously refuse, but this does not make them passive. On the contrary, improvisation, fugitivity and impropriety characterise the contingent inoperative and active practices of the sociopoetic work of refusal.

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³¹ S. Prozorov, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-182.

³² M. Abbott, “Glory, Spectacle and Inoperativity: Agamben’s Praxis of *Theoria*”, in Daniel McLoughlin (ed.) *Agamben and Radical Politics*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2016, p. 28.

³³ G. Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 266.