

ECK 281 - Professor Reuben

Response Paper 2

November 4, 2021

**An Unwillingness to Show Up Empty-Handed: Giorgio Agamben's Response to the Politics of the COVID-19 Pandemic as an Epistemological Study**

Giorgio Agamben has outwardly shared his attempt to analyze and ensuingly criticize the political reaction of governments to the COVID-19 pandemic. His polarizing, immensely passionate positions and verbiage have cost him much of his standing in the politically/philosophically radical left community. His interpretations and opinions can be viewed behind the comfortable excuse of one's individual right to express virtually every thought — this can be an egregious misunderstanding of the freedom of speech under liberal democratic ideals. Because of this, I find that his central argument about the despotization of the world through the pandemic, in addition to the more detailed critiques philosophically extrapolated from this topic, fails to pass an essential, fundamental litmus test: what entitles his quasi-superior credibility to conclude so stridently? It is my contention that Agamben is falling into an educationally stunting pattern, seemingly common in the realm of advanced academia, that involves the outstretch and thus fabrication of conclusions that perpetuate a cycle of misinformation out of a necessity to have tangible answers. This, I believe, is a fatal flaw remaining unspoken in discourse surrounding the rural/urban divide and its sub-problems.

ECK 281 - Professor Reuben

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November 4, 2021

Agamben's academic behavior and its implications (which I must preface will be rightfully analyzed only in this hyperfocused area and not on his other philosophical specialties) are highlighted with his short articles on what ultimately became the COVID-19 pandemic like "The Invention of an Epidemic" and "Contagion." In addition, the outside reporting of The New York Times writer Christopher Caldwell, helps wrap up a clear depiction of Agamben's intentions. I specifically wish to look abstractly at how Agamben's responses perfectly symbolize a deeper struggle when analyzing the rural/urban divide as a whole and especially on a need for action-oriented level of thought that sometimes is simply unattainable.

At the center of his denigration of those who wield iron fists across the globe and on a more national scale — understood as the federal governments/rulers, supranational organizations, even journalists and the greater media — is the clear division between these supposed oligarchs and the general public. It can be perceived that this divide is synonymous with the rural/urban divide because both splits perpetuate the false necessity for definiteness in the academic realm. Not to mention, one may interpolate that both divides share similar characteristics such as generally separating the rich and poor, the BIPOC community and the white community, the modernist and the traditionalist, the conservative and the liberal, etc. For this reason, one can find that while Agamben is speaking almost exclusively to this pandemic-related, high-class scrutinization, he simultaneously ultimately comments on the frustrating nature of analyzing the rural/urban divide and its innate facets. Thus, we have established the two-pronged issue of Agamben's analyses — the first prong being the

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misconception that academia requires concrete, finalized conclusions and the second being then the misguided attempt to understand the rural/urban divide as an ongoing, oft-indefinite conversation in academia.

But how these problems arose stems from the way Agamben seemingly undermined the weight of his own words on others; it is here where intention loses all meaning and impact on the receiver, in this case the community exposed to his work, takes the extremely important cake. It is this outwardly perceived utilization of the pandemic as a mechanism for ranting, expressing personal fear and so vehemently extrapolating on subjects outside of his earned jurisdiction without acknowledging any possible impediment to comprehension that truly makes for such arguments to turn problematic. One must ask themselves, what gives Agamben the right to use his influence as a renowned philosophical mind to so definitively and harshly conclude? Isn't he essentially abusing his power similar to this powerful class he so passionately accuses of mistreatment and manipulation? To me, his actions would be much more understandable had he left room for factual evidence, counterargument, outside perspectives, or even a concession to lacking such pinnacles to basic argumentation. In fact, if accuracy and transparency is the goal in the realm of academia, as it has seemed to be, then an admission to an inability to conclude, still with dedication given to the deepest of analysis, would be quasi-perfection — that is if perfection is redefined epistemologically to the modern neoliberal and capitalist world where product trumps process.

ECK 281 - Professor Reuben

Response Paper 2

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This conceptualization and construction of thinking in the classroom can not be ignored even though it seemingly has been. Specifically with subjects like the rural/urban divide in fields like the humanities and some social sciences where often definition for the sake of clarity breeds inaccuracy, academics must ask themselves what to prioritize: accuracy with depth or clarity with overreach? If one wishes to appropriately discuss the rural/urban divide, we can learn from Agamben's misdoing and foster a certain level of comfortable, actionable uncertainty harmonized with a level of care and depth that scratches the ideal surface between extrapolation and fabrication.

The fruitfulness of Agamben's work lies in its theoretical and philosophical significance, not in the details themselves. It is by taking a more abstracted step back where one may agree on a deeper level with Christopher Caldwell's statement, "The politics of the pandemic expose a deeper ethical, social, and even metaphysical erosion." This erosion permitted a possible reinterpretation of the way in which we discuss the rural/urban divide and epistemology as a whole, all made exceedingly clear through Agamben's work. Following the line of thinking for which was just advocated, in no way is this partially college-educated student able to definitively state that Giorgio Agamben's process of analyzing the politics surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic are problematic or wrong. One can only leave space for further analysis and innate gaps in abilities while providing the utmost relevant information to argue. In this way, redefining the discourse also reshapes the rural/urban divide at a fundamental level.