



YOUTH, TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION: BETWEEN BENJAMIN AND AGAMBEN

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on the modern conception of youth and its relevance, or perhaps irrelevance, to the growing use of technological tools, like Zoom for teaching and learning. For this purpose, I focus on Giorgio Agamben's short blog post entitled "Requiem for the Student" (posted on the internet in May 2020), which offers a sharp, and to some extent provocative, critique of the shift to online learning during the COVID pandemic. I argue, that one of Agamben's central arguments harks back to Walter Benjamin's metaphysics of youth, developed between 1910–1917. Other works that address a range of issues connected to Agamben's short post (e.g. bio-politics, state of emergency, contemporary conservative thought) have not raised this connection between Agamben and Benjamin. I show that Agamben's critique of online education reintroduces a modern conception of youth. Although this conception is not explicit in his post, Agamben makes a strong case against youth's disappearance from the educational arena. I examine the connection between youth technology and education and point to some of its broader political implications.

Keywords: youth, Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, education, technology.

I. Agamben, Benjamin and youth

On May 23, 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic spreading rapidly in northern Italy, Giorgio Agamben posted a short text entitled *Requiem for the Student* on the website of the "Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici" (Agamben, 2020; 2021). The transformation in teaching and learning at universities in Italy and around the world – the shift from classroom to online learning – stands at the center of Agamben's critical post. "What was evident to careful observers," Agamben writes, "namely, that the so-called pandemic would be used as a pretext for the increasingly pervasive diffusion of digital technologies – is being duly realized." Agamben's opposition to the "diffusion" of technology (referring here specifically to "digitalization" of learning) laments the loss of the physical presence of the participants in a single educational space (for example a classroom) that is so important for the relationship between students and

teachers. However, the loss of this aspect of, arguably, most educational experiences marks only a condition of a radical shift that is more crucial for Agamben. This shift is what Agamben refers to as the loss of being a student as “a form of life.” Thus:

we are not so much interested here in the consequent transformation of teaching, in which the element of physical presence (always so important in the relationship between students and teachers) disappears definitively, as we are in the disappearance of group discussion in seminars, which was the liveliest part of instruction. Part of the technological barbarism that we are currently living through is the cancellation from life of any experience of the senses, as well as the loss of the gaze, permanently imprisoned in a spectral screen [...] Much more decisive in what is taking place is something that, significantly, is not spoken of at all: namely, the end of being a student [*studentato*, studenthood] as a form of life. (Agamben, 2020)

What does Agamben mean by a “form of life”? Why is it so central, even more than the physical presence of teachers and students in the same space, or the sensual experiences associated by Agamben with learning (even while it is dependent on them)? To answer, I believe one should note Agamben’s recourse to history: He speaks of the history of Western civilization as constituted by an “inter-subjective” interaction between people coming from different places, and gathered together in designated locations that are called universities. “Universities” he argues:

were born in Europe from student associations – *universitates* – and they owe their name to them. To be a student entailed, first of all, a form of life in which studying and listening to lectures were certainly decisive features, but no less important were encounters and constant exchanges with other *scholarii*, who often came from remote places, and who gathered together according to their place of origin in *nationes*. This form of life evolved in various ways over the centuries, but, from the *clerici vagantes* of the Middle Ages to the student movements of the twentieth century, the social dimension of the phenomenon remained constant. Anyone who has taught in a university classroom knows well how, in front of one’s very eyes, friendships are made, and, according to their cultural and political interests, small study and research groups are formed that continue even after classes have ended. (Agamben, 2020)

There is much to be said for Agamben’s rather clever, perhaps nostalgic, emphasis on the centrality of Catholicism to the development of modern Europe. This emphasis relates to what is commonly regarded as his conservatism. From such a point of view, being a student was decisive not only to how universities were formed, but, more generally, to how the modern Western political order (for example, the differentiation into “nations”) was born out of the Catholic scholarly institutions of the Middle Ages. These aspects of Agamben’s thought, however, lie beyond the scope of this short paper. Here, I wish to focus on how this historical argument frames studenthood as a “form of life” that provides communal and enduring “friendship” and constitutes the political.

This framing of student life is not Agamben's invention. Being a student as a form of life is a theme first introduced by the German-Jewish scholar, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). The connection between Agamben's "requiem" and Benjamin's theory of youth has not appeared in other reactions to Agamben's controversial post. Some scholars have rightly criticized Agamben's downplaying of a pandemic that took the lives of so many people around the world. Others have debated a range of issues associated with Agamben's text, including bio-politics, the "state of emergency", the question of sovereignty, and conservative political theory (e.g. Masschelein & Simons, 2021; Salzani 2021). We are nevertheless entitled to draw a connection between Agamben and Benjamin due to Agamben's own attestation of his debt to Benjamin (for example, in his early work on violence or in his *Signatura Rerum*) (Agamben, 2008; 2009, p. 103–111). Standing "at the crossroad of modern intellectual landscape" (Moses, 2009, p. 12), Benjamin represents a significant source of intellectual inspiration for Agamben.

Youth was a central theme in Benjamin's early writings including a paper composed in 1915 entitled *The Life of Students (Das Leben der Studenten)*, as well as a range of essays, fragmented texts, and notes written between 1910 and 1917: *Socrates, The Metaphysics of Youth, On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, and *Dostoyevsky's The Idiot*. Some of these were published in contemporary periodicals and student journals. This selection mainly reflects the evolution of Benjamin's theory of youth, which he developed before and during the First World War. In these writings, Benjamin developed his ideas regarding a conception of youth that had proliferated and, to some extent, been reinvented, in the German social, cultural, and intellectual atmosphere of the time. The trope of youth also appeared in the works of contemporary intellectuals like Erich Gutkind and Oswald Spengler. It can be found in Carl Jung's archetype of Puer Aeternus ("forever young"), in Karl Mannheim's discussion of "generationality" (Generationalität); in Frank Wedekind's play *Spring Awakening*, in Fidus's popular drawings, and the overall new style of "art nouveau" whose German variant was referred to as "youth art" (Jugendstil). Perhaps the most salient example of the social and political impact of the new concept of youth was the emergence and rapid growth of the German Youth Movement (Hotam, 2019). This social and intellectual background invites much more detailed examination than what I can provide in this paper. What seems to invite our attention is Benjamin's specific connection between youth and the trope of "the life of students" that is also relevant to Agamben's "requiem."

In *The Life of Students*, Benjamin sharply distinguishes between two forms of being a student: The student may be a member of "a community of learning" (*eine Gemeinschaft von Erkennenden*), or the object of "vocational training" (Benjamin, 2011, p. 199). Benjamin advocates the former as an educational experience that transcends social and political conditions, and views the latter as enslaved to and by social

norms and demands. A community of learning includes unmediated and enduring relations that imply intimacy and creativity. It also nurtures resistance to social control and opens up a free communal space of interaction. Vocational training, by contrast, represents the instrumental needs imposed by society and is a type of education that is constituted by social dictates.

For Benjamin, the concept of youth symbolizes the community of learning. In claiming so, he connects youth with the “life of the students.” Echoing neo-romantic notions, Benjamin represents the “being as a student,” – or else youth – as an “erotic and creative” core that “cannot be captured in terms of the pragmatic description of details (the history of institutions, customs, and so on)” (Benjamin, 1996, p. 37). There is a clear inability to articulate, understand, or “capture” youth in social terms. Benjamin then suggests that the true youthful spirit of education relates to an alleged human essence that escapes social conditioning. The realization of the human essence is not aligned with the requirements of society, and though it is revealed in certain social contexts (for example, that of the students in Wilhelminian Germany) it marks the quintessence of being human that lies beyond social circumstances.

It is in this context that Benjamin speaks of the Eros of youth. What cannot be captured in social terms is an “erotic” core of the human being. In evoking Eros, Benjamin alludes to the Platonic idea of elevating the human soul towards the godly, as described in the *Phaedrus* (Plato, 1952). Plato’s “chariot allegory” of two winged horses and a charioteer who struggles to keep control over the two horses that pull in opposite directions is perhaps one of the most telling images in Western thought. Within this struggle, the charioteer is driven by the “heavenly Eros” (Nygern, 1953) – symbolized by one of the winged horses – to transcend the worldly and to return to the godly demesne of truth, beauty, and knowledge. For Benjamin, this image represents the innate human capacity to eschew all social and historical circumstances and to enter “the kingdom of God” (Hotam, 2023, p. 60). Thus, youth in this context means “living and working sub specie aeternitatis,” a reference to Spinoza that he reiterates in a range of texts from this time (Benjamin, 2011, pp. 58, 70, 90). What Benjamin calls the “perversion” of universities lies in their attempt to transform “the creative spirit into the vocational spirit” (Benjamin, 2011, p. 41). “All these institutions,” argues Benjamin, “are nothing, but a marketplace for the preliminary and provisional,... they are simply there to fill the empty waiting time, diversions from the voice that summons them to build their lives with a unified spirit of creative action, Eros, and youth” (Benjamin, 2011, p. 46).

The problem with modern education that Benjamin underlines is that it is dedicated to instrumental training while stifling the youthful energy that he associates with the intimate, creative, erotic, and free (i.e. free from social requirements) community of learning. Youth, in this sense is not a sociological or psychological category, as is common today in academic discussions of youth culture, youth organizations, or the

psychology of youth. For Benjamin, youth cannot be reduced to the social and historical context in which it appears. This is also true of the concept of age – Benjamin is not identifying youth with a certain biological age (being 15, 16, or 17 years old) that comes after childhood and anticipates adulthood. Rather, he uses ontological (and as I suggest next, theological) terms to accentuate a category of being. To be young is thus a human capacity, or the potential of transcending material (e.g. social, biological, historical) reality. In his paper, Joris Vlieghe (forthcoming) rightly emphasizes youth as an “ontological force” that defines us as humans. For Benjamin, this means a potential that is integral to human beings and involves transcending enslaving circumstances, including biological factors (i.e. a particular age), and social and political conditions, but is not exhausted by these factors and conditions. In this sense, one may be young in any given biological age as much as in any social and historical context. The description of the youth houses in Jesse Torenbosch’s (forthcoming) paper seems to be apt here as well. These houses enable their educational programs to emerge from the mere presence of youths together (rather than imposing them “from above”). They also aim their activities at the imagined “free time” of the youth, which translates into a form of resistance to any outside influences, dictates, or demands.

The notion of transcendence is here key. In pointing to the transcendent capacity of youth Benjamin makes use of theological language and symbolism, referring to matters like eternity, revelation, redemption, messianism, and God. For example, his unfinished paper *The Metaphysics of Youth* entails a reworking of Meister Eckhart’s mystical allegories of youth, the godly within the human, and the awakening of the soul (Hotam, 2019; 2023). The notion of “awakening” points to such a connection. It is a central theme in Eckhart’s (2009) allegoric reading of the passage from Luke 7:14 *Young man, I tell you, stand up! (Adolescens, tibi dico: surge!)*. Eckhart (2009) allegorically interprets Jesus’s miracle of resurrecting a dead boy as a symbol of how God can potentially awaken his Son in every human soul. He then expands upon the identification of the Son with the soul to express the relationship between God and a human being. In Eckhart’s thinking, the image of an awakened Son is symbolized by youth (*Adolescens*). And thus:

Why did he say “young man?”... “Young man”: All the powers that belong to the soul do not age.... Therefore, “Young man.” The masters call “young” that which is close to its beginning. In the intellect man is ever young.... Now he says, “Young man, arise.” What does it mean “arise”? “Arise” from the work, and let the soul “arise” in herself!”. (Eckhart, 2009, p. 396)

The term “young” thus represents the divine within the soul, and the human capacity to transcend this-worldliness. To awaken youth denotes an inner development within the human soul towards salvation. Youth therefore marks an important aspect of the idea of divine presence embedded within human experience and awakening stands for its purpose and mission in this world.

When he refers to the awakening of youth, Benjamin evokes these mystical allegories and reframes them for modern needs. Especially in his text *The Metaphysics of Youth*, he uses dense allegoric language to point to the human potential (i.e. youth) to transcend worldly temporality and that needs to be awakened in us all (Benjamin, 2011). “Awakening,” writes Benjamin under the pseudonym Eckhart.phil, “[...] is a consciousness of the unconditional value, the gaiety and seriousness of this new youth” (Benjamin, 2011, p. 60). The idea of youth that Benjamin plays with here is fundamentally mystical. It represents for Benjamin the mission of a “new religion” in which “the spirit of youth will awaken in all”. In other words, it is the mystical opening up of “a spiritual reality” that may endow “being a student” with a meaning (Benjamin, 1996, p. 133).

Youth’s theologically demarcated potential for freedom, resistance, and innovation is also what being a student as a form of life means. Such a form of life represents the possibility of transcending social and political conditions and forming a community that embodies this capacity. The collective experience of youth marks the potential for resisting social control – a potential that is lost not only when colonized for concrete social and political needs but also when the type of community that supports its presence disintegrates.

In tapping into mystical allegories, Benjamin’s youth may represent what scholars have termed “theocratic anarchism”, bringing Benjamin closer to the so-called anarchic *Antipolitik* of Gustav Landauer (Guerra, 2017, pp. 126–135; Jacobson, 2003, pp. 28–29; Schwartz, 2006, pp. 205–219; 2015, pp. 172–190). The basis for associating his thought with anarchism lies in Benjamin’s formulation of “awakening” as resistance to social and political control. Awakening represents, one could say, an anarchic revolutionary force because it radically resists all forms of politics. To put it differently, revolution means in this context eschewing the arena of politics. Especially in Landauer’s thinking, such an “anarchic revolution” brings messianic categories of redemption and the end of time to bear on the field of politics. One could argue, that Benjamin goes even further since for him this theological understanding of “anarchic revolution” is marked by the separation of the messianic potency from the actual political sphere. Politics is starkly severed from salvation (implying also the separation between cosmology and soteriology). On this basis, any form of control that the political arena may offer can only be negated, refuted, or resisted. This approach emphasizes a comprehensive refusal to participate in politics that derives from a commitment to a pure spiritual principle that is represented by youth involving a clear distancing from all available political options and radical resistance to all political ideologies. If the possibility of redemption lies beyond history (even if this does not mean that it is external to it), it also resides, *ceteris paribus*, beyond any concrete political realization. Accordingly, no ruler, flesh, and blood (as Martin Buber puts it)

may call themselves the messiah (Buber, 1985). This does not mean that messianism is contested, but rather that it is upheld by being negated.

Benjamin's metaphysics of youth thus brings theological categories to bear on political actions. Ontology should be understood as a substitute for theology. In the context of education, his revolutionary thinking is not only an iconoclastic revolt against any enslavement to modern social and political requirements. It is also the opposite iconographic quest for an intimate, creative, enduring alternative manifested in the "community of learning." Though articulated in worldly terms (for example in the distinction between vocational training and the community of learning), the educational alternative he seeks reworks theological conceptions that relate to god, redemption and the end of time.

Agamben's reference to being a student as a form of life, I suggest, picks up this rich and complicated theme. Hannah Arendt (1996), in her analysis of Augustine's theology, consciously explores an area of thought that goes beyond Augustine's explicit arguments and relates to what "Augustine himself has merely implied". We may reflect in the same way on what Agamben means by the student's form of life. Thus, applying Arendt's method to Agamben's arguments, student life implies a communal experience in the Benjaminian sense. There is a youthful essence of being a student as a form of life that Agamben brings to the fore and that refers to its ontological, indeed redemptive nature. This essence of youth lies beyond all social and political conditions while at the same time defining the political.

For Agamben, this possibility of being a student, of youth in the Benjaminian sense, is destroyed by the introduction of new technologies for teaching and learning. Agamben's argument is here radical because it starkly separates between the type of community that youth represents and online learning that his concept of technology specifically refers to. The one (youth) disappears with the introduction of the other (online learning). We may recall that such a clear division characterized Benjamin's conceptualization of youth. Arguably, the evaporation of youth, its potential for freedom, revolution, transcendence, "Eros" and redemption, marks the "civilizational break" (Diner, 1988) that Agamben refers to when he claims, for example, that exactly this type of being "which has lasted for almost ten centuries, now ends forever" (Agamben, 2020). Because of the shift from actual contact between people to the "flat" intermediation of the screen, a certain human capacity that the concept of youth represents with all its metaphysical and theological baggage comes to an end.

Of course, Agamben has in mind the disappearance of the physical aspect of learning together. But physicality is important only because it provides a pre-condition to the unmediated relations and the free interactions between human beings central to Benjamin's "community of learning." For Agamben, the new conditions of learning negate the potential of youth that depends on such relations and interactions. Online

learning thus precludes the possibility of youthful communality. Again, we should remember that youth is not a biological, sociological, or historical category, but a symbol of the human potential for freedom from enslaving conditions. Without this human potential, not only will the universities meet their end (an end that in a certain sense, they deserve), but the possibility of human freedom is dissolved.

II. Technology and education

This last point invites further reflection. Agamben clearly thinks in catastrophic terms. His calamitous tone explicitly invokes Fascism (in Italy) and Nazism – the very emblems of barbarism and the termination of all things human (Adorno, 1991, p. 18). Take for example the punitive remark at the end of his short blog post:

Professors who agree – as they are doing *en masse* – to submit to the new dictatorship of telematics and to hold their courses only online are the perfect equivalent of the university teachers who in 1931 swore allegiance to the Fascist regime. (Agamben, 2020)

This invocation of Fascism is surely a rhetorical hyperbole. The turn to online learning around the world was not ideologically oriented, nor similar in any way to an oath willingly given to a totalitarian regime. One may further attribute this type of alarmism to Agamben’s conservative outlook, that resists, perhaps, anything technological, or generically disapproves of technological progress (assuming that one associates progress with a growing dependency on technological tools). His catastrophic tone seems to relate to such issues and may invite stern criticism.

That being said, when reflected upon in the context of Benjamin’s metaphysics of youth, Agamben’s position mainly evokes central ideas of critical theory in two interconnected ways. First, as presented above, for Agamben the online education that was introduced around the world due to the pandemic and that continues to affect school culture and the climate of the classroom today marks a distancing from the form of life of youth that represents for Benjamin the human capacity for freedom. This capacity is associated with what Stephane Moses (following Benjamin) called “the revolutionary energy of the new” (Moses, 2009, pp. 108–109). Such an “energy” refers to a type of hope that is always coupled with the idea of transcendence and that especially Benjamin associated with the potential of redemption that is invested in every present moment. Agamben seems to be referring to the association between technology and education that culminates in the evaporation of the horizon of transcendence that is central to Benjamin’s metaphysics.

Such a return to Benjamin’s metaphysics connects Agamben with critical theory because Benjamin was not alone in this association between education and transcendence. Most of the central figures of the Frankfurt School introduced similar theological vocabulary. In the 1960s, for example, Theodor Adorno’s classroom lectures and

radio talks on education made it clear, that any secular worldview can only be understood as “a translation of theological conceptions” (Adorno, 2000, p. 98). In particular, critical theory invokes a “translation” or, in Adorno’s terms, a (re)conceptualization of the theological concepts such as transcendence, god and redemption. Here, the notion of redemption, albeit separated from the possibility of its actualization in the world, was central; it informed the concept of “negativity”, perhaps the concept that is most associated with Adorno’s postwar critique (Mendes-Flohr, 1983, pp. 634–635). In the same vein, the 80-year-old Marx Horkheimer retrospectively summarized the critical project as being “Judaism undercover” (Bielik-Robson, 2014, p. 63; Horkheimer, 1979). Agata Bielik-Robson (2014) brilliantly shows how the theological aspect that Horkheimer attributed to his critical theory also related to a type of secularized messianism that is tacitly embedded in the critical quest for emancipation from enslaving conditions.

This relationship between critical theory and theological vocabulary requires a much more detailed analysis than what I can provide in this paper. One point to note, is that any view that fails to take into account the theological aspect of this vibrant modern intellectual legacy will fail to grasp the implicit relation between its critique of social domination, politics, and technology, and its allusions to transcendence. The latter is always part of the human potential for freedom; it is perhaps the very core of what that potential means. This may be especially true for education. Without nurturing this human potential, education means – to use Adorno’s coinage – enslaving people “to the machine”; the type of education that “turns human beings into a mass” (Sherman, 2007, p. 35).

Agamben appears to be continuing a line of argument that is central to critical theory’s thinkers and that is captured by Benjamin’s trope of “youth.” He expresses opposition to the withdrawal of youth from the educational arena because this means the evaporation of the potential to transcend social and political enslaving conditions. Because it transforms a genuine interaction between people into mere digital representations, online teaching for Agamben is devoid of the unmediated, intimate, and erotic relations central to Benjamin’s community of learning. There is good reason to suppose that teaching of this sort is equivalent to what Benjamin called vocational training, the type of education that serves the instrumental needs imposed by society, and Adorno presented as enslavement.

Second, this shift in education also represents the termination of being political, of what could be termed “de-politicization” of the human being. One should not confuse Benjamin’s anti-political position (his affinity to the so-called “theocratic anarchism”), with the type of de-politicized society that Agamben points to. Benjamin’s messianic project is invested in and constructed for the sake of the political. The re-

demptive future that provides Benjamin's metaphysics of youth with its impetus at- tests to this fact; it represents the hope that was shared by all critical theory thinkers that "suffering be remedied and society redeemed" (Gordon, 2016, p. 181).

I emphasize the concept of the future to indicate that this is not a concrete agenda or ideology to be implemented politically. This point seems to be especially important given the misuse of "youth" today and in the past in the name of horrific political agendas – from fascism to contemporary support of terrorism. Indeed, the conception of youth is vulnerable to manipulations if it is mobilized to serve a concrete ideology or political agenda, for example in students' demonstrations. Benjamin, in contrast, conceives of the future as a messianic time that is always the "time to come" (Levine, 2014) of history that can never be a means to a political or ideological end. In this context, Benjamin refers to the idea of "fulfilled time." For him, the idea of a "fulfilled time" "appears in the Bible as its dominant historical idea: the messianic time" (Benjamin, 1996, p. 24). In messianic terms, the youthful "time of the now" can occur only as an extra-historical event within history (Kohlenbach, 2002, p. 34). It can be realized, one may suggest, only by not being historically manifest. In his *Theological-Political Fragment* from 1921, Benjamin shows the extent to which this point remains decisive for him. "Nothing that is historical," writes Benjamin, "can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything Messianic" (2006, pp. 305–306). Benjamin's "future" points to a messianic moment that is explicitly removed from historical temporality, albeit always exists as a potential of and within history. It is this potential that provides the hope for the redeeming of society. In this way, the concept of the future evokes not a retreat from the world in any simple sense, but rather responsibility for it.

It is appropriate to reflect in this context on Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard's concept of love because it echoes Benjamin's investment in and for the political. Especially in his paper *On Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love* (1939) Adorno resists Kierkegaard's Christian focus on the love of God, not because such agape is wrong, but because it fails to bring about the social change it promises. The following, rather striking, lines from Adorno's *Education after Auschwitz* can be read as if they had been composed with Kierkegaard in mind:

One of the greatest impulses of Christianity, not immediately identical with its dogma, was to eradicate the coldness that permeates everything. But this attempt failed; surely because it did not reach into the societal order that produces and reproduces that coldness. (Adorno, 2005, p. 202)

For Adorno, Kierkegaard's love fails to deliver social change, because it relates to an abstract image of god that resides within the humane. For Adorno, we are dealing with a love of god (even if reflected in humans) that can be easily transferred into a deep "hatred" of human beings (Adorno, 1939). One may argue that for Adorno it is one thing to love humanity (as in Kierkegaard's doctrine of love) and another to love concrete people "as they exist today" (Adorno, 2005, p. 202). Only the second

type of love is invested in the social and political world of human beings. Like Benjamin, Adorno is committed to human beings in their concrete social and political circumstances. Since “to love” means for Adorno to redeem society, it translates into resistance to social control, and it points to a strong emphasis on the political world and on the duties that come with it. I tend to agree with Bielik-Robson’s understanding of Adorno as exemplifying a particularly modern Jewish “spiritual investment in the world” (Bielik-Robson, 2020). For her, this investment is equivalent to responsibility for fellow human beings, mirroring Benjamin’s (and Adorno’s) deepest commitments.

Yet, in his critique of contemporary education, Agamben refers to human beings who are disinterested in the world (that is the political world) and who are in this particular sense de-politicized due to the new terms of learning. Taking critical theory thinkers into consideration, Agamben’s argument points to a shift in education that represents the termination of being political and it is this radical change that may be thus termed “de-politicization.” De-political humans are anything but “invested” in the world. With no spiritual investment in the world, the human being is reduced to nothing more than “an appendage of the machinery”, representing merely “an object of calculation” (Adorno, 1991, pp. 98–99).

A metaphor that may encapsulate this process of de-politicization of human beings that Agamben seems to have in mind is atomization. This metaphor, I suggest, fleshes out Agamben’s complaint about the breaking down of the human being into mere pixels on the flat screen. Modern thinkers presented the isolation of human beings in what they saw, following Marx, as a more and more alienated society. Adorno’s *The Culture Industry* (1996) is one salient example of such an approach. However, while isolation brings about the distancing of human beings from each other, or their alienation within a social system, atomization involves their breaking down into mere digital information. Unlike the isolation of human beings that can be produced in different contexts and through a variety of social manipulations, atomization is mainly a function of the current technological state of affairs. Rather than singling out a modern systematic structure (like a factory), one can imagine Agamben pointing to a cloud of digital information that consumes the humane. Atomization, then, is the result of a technological arrangement in which human beings are not only isolated but, more profoundly, dissolve into mere data. Arguably, when we think of other human beings as “data” we may rather easily ignore their humanity and relate to them as mere records of information that can be canceled, deleted, or erased by a simple push on a mental knob.

Specifically, what is lost in this new de-politicized context is the human “signature.” I refer here to the concept of signature because Agamben’s blog post seems to hark back to the theory of signatures he presented mainly in his work *Signatura Rerum* from 2008. In Renaissance thought, a signature was what endowed a thing with its

hidden essence. To reveal the essence of any given thing (that is, to reveal its signature) is the task of science. This idea had theological and more specifically mystical roots. It was taken up, according to Agamben, in the work of modern thinkers like Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's theory of youth may be thus seen as a theory of signatures because it concerns revealing a hidden human potential that Benjamin articulates mystically. Agamben can be understood as following Benjamin. He is concerned about the disappearance of a signature of education as a form of life – a particular communal experience of being among fellow human beings that the concept of youth represents and in which the Western idea of the political is rooted.

Agamben's recourse to being a student as a form of life makes then a case for the disappearance of "human investment" in the world. We have seen above for example how for Benjamin and Adorno this investment takes our commitment to other human beings, with whom we live together and to whom we are deeply connected, as its point of departure; it is a type of responsibility to the world "that suffering be remedied and society redeemed" (Gordon, 2016, p. 181). This responsibility to other human beings that both thinkers adopted from Jewish sources (Bielik-Robson, 2014) is intertwined with the mission of critique to "emancipate" human beings from "enslaving circumstances" (Horkheimer 1982, p. 194). Agamben's "requiem" expands on this point. For him, the atomization of human beings is also their de-politicization and I suggested that such a process also denotes the loss of the human "signature." The community of learning that depends upon physicality, intimacy, Eros, and unmediated relations disappears, and the specific interrelations, responsibilities to other human beings and mutual commitments that constitute it disintegrate.

III. Concluding remarks

The process that Agamben relates to invites the reconfiguration of the political arena in new and, for him, dangerous ways. I wish to conclude, then, by speculating on some contemporary political implications that could be associated with Agamben's critique. This is not to necessarily agree with Agamben's alarmism, or his conservatism. But especially in his dialogue with critical thinking one may find challenging arguments for education today. In particular, I would like to at least briefly explore, following Agamben, how youth, freedom, and democracy are intimately connected and how the disappearance of one is entangled with the decline of the others. Agamben may not have thought of this particular connection. Nonetheless, his critical observations regarding the student as a form of life may also provide fresh insights into education's role in the current crisis of liberal democracy along with the ongoing waning of the support for the values that are associated with it. Thus, although Agamben invokes familiar images of nihilism and fascism, he likely agrees that we are in uncharted

political water. A new political reality is currently unfolding whose outcome is unforeseen by all.

Let me note two points. First, it can be argued that a crisis of liberal democracy is visible in current political state of affairs. On the one hand, we are experiencing the rise of right-wing nationalist movements and parties the world over (from the BJP in India, the Law and Justice Party in Poland, Brothers of Italy, and Fidesz in Hungary to Trumpism in the United States, and the coalition of far-right politicians and parties that constitute Israel's elected government). Even where the right is not in power, "racist and xenophobic political parties like National Rally in France, Sweden Democrats, and Alternative für Deutschland in Germany have increased in strength as their ideas, once deemed beyond the pale, have moved mainstream" (Schneider & Hotam, 2023). On the other hand, we can equally argue for a left-progressive emergent suspicion of the state – conceived by some scholars and activists as existing only to serve the rich and the powerful. This mistrust exposes how democratic institutions were actually designed to serve a particular group, an elite class, or a "hegemony" and perpetuate its privileges. These strong claims are accompanied by the growing sentiment that present institutions are ill-equipped to provide for a more equal and just social, or ecological order, and that actually-existing liberalism marks a vehicle for human exploitation and ecological exhaustion (Schneider & Hotam, 2023). Within this framing, laws, norms and institutions are not regarded as the foundations of "true" democracy, but as the means of restraining the democratic energies and aspirations of "oppressed" people.

What connects these contesting political claims? I believe it is the combining of the mistrust in the existing political organizations with an acclaiming of the "will of the people" (or more accurately, the portion of it that is deemed morally, or politically important). Thus, especially the champions of what is variously called post-liberalism, or illiberal democracy, seem to offer an alternative that collapses the distinctions between the main political categories of liberalism – the law, the state, and the people. As Yoram Hazony (2020), perhaps one of the most vocal protagonists of this approach today, demonstrates, the rule of law becomes whatever serves the interests of the people (a rhetorical concept that need not correspond with an actual majority), with the state charged with securing its implementation. But a parallel collapse characterizes also "left" support of vicious acts of violence and appalling cruelty in the name of freedom for the oppressed. Here, we may identify a Manichean approach in which the will of the oppressed people does not only override all other ethical considerations, but is regarded as the benevolent antidote to a malevolent oppressive state organization, even if the state may be a democracy, and the remedy is provided by a terror organization. Like in the case of illiberalism, though somewhat differently, the rule of law is conceived as whatever serves the interests of those who are considered worthy. In both cases (from the right and from the left) we may find traces of a political-

theology in which there is a sacred mission, allegedly pre-existing the institutions of the modern state, that consumes the state and destroys the supremacy of the law.

Second, the atomization of human beings can be connected to these new political visions. This association of education, technology, and world politics might seem odd. However, it is important to reflect on the conditions that enable the current political changes and how these may include also the disappearance of youth (what Agamben calls “being a student as a form of life.”). The main point to note lies in how youth encapsulates the human potential for freedom, intimacy, and unmediated and enduring relations. In such a way youth represents a type of “togetherness” that takes into consideration other human beings, other perspectives, and the very existence of others. This point, I believe, is crucial. When Agamben laments the disappearance of a type of togetherness that youth represents he points to the disappearance of our ability to see the world from others’ point of view. Arguably, not only the democratic public space is dependent on this capacity, but also any possibility to defy Manichean simplicity, as much as resist illiberal politics.

Agamben thus underlines, even if inadvertently, the retreat of the inter-subjective mechanisms that sustain democracy and support the repelling of the collapse between the law, the people and the state that characterizes the political challenges to democracy today.

Here Arendt’s discussion of politics comes to mind because of the centrality of togetherness of this sort in her postwar writings. Like we did with Benjamin, we are entitled to connect Arendt to Agamben, because Agamben himself has stated his debt to Arendt (for example, in his early paper on violence, as well as in his celebrated *Homo Sacer*). For Arendt in particular, a “togetherness” of human beings “in speech and in action” is key. When we connect with fellow human beings in such a way, we put into practice our “enlarged mentality” that is a mode of thought that “by force of the imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public” (Schwartz, 2016, pp. 152–155). Arendt associated this mode of thought with her concept of judgment (our capacity “to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly” (Arendt, 1982)). For her, following Kant, our capacity to judge involves the appeal to something common outside the self and communication with the others with whom we live together. To be among fellow human beings means to operate in a way that makes their inner world (their different points of view, different ways of thinking, different understandings) available to us, taking into consideration the plurality of ways of being in the world, the idea of freedom, the possibility of creating something new and the capacity to come to terms with others with whom one lives together.

Democratic public space depends on the existence of plurality in this particular sense (the existence of different points of view, different interests, and different ways of life). Connecting democracy and youth (in Benjamin’s sense) is plausible in the context of Arendt’s thought, because her notion of plurality is not just a juxtaposition

of, for example, many faces on a screen. Plurality must include a joining together, a specific form of being-in-connection to others that harks back to the immediate and unmediated “community” that Benjamin celebrated and the loss of which Agamben laments. We may speak here of intimacy with others which denotes the ability to see the world from the point of view of our fellow human beings. In Arendt’s words, “to think with an enlarged mentality means to train one’s imagination to go visiting” (Arendt, 1989, p. 43).

Introducing the concept of intimacy in this context is perhaps somewhat unorthodox. Nonetheless, although Arendt does not explicitly refer to Benjamin, she echoes his notion of youth when she refers to our capacity for “visiting.” Her “enlarged mentality” is not only the capacity to communicate in some technical sense (e.g., exchanging information), but more profoundly about the visitation of others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. There is here, however, an interesting complication in Arendt’s thought. On the one hand, Arendt consistently maintains a distinction between the private and the public spheres. Intimacy and unmediated relations are, for her, exclusively private affairs. On the other hand, already in her “Origins” Arendt discusses “intimacy with all types of mankind,” which was integral to the political project of the Enlightenment and related mainly to the acceptance of the Jewish other into society (Arendt 1958: 57). Intimacy in this context is a political category, and for Arendt it is made to resist all forms of political hostility towards others and in particular Antisemitism. Arendt’s going “visiting” appears to be a description of this latter form of intimacy. Can we think of anything more intimate than seeing the world from the standpoint of another? What is visitation if not a form of close familiarity from within? Intimacy is thus not alien to the type of togetherness that Arendt associates with the political.

The atomization of humans that Agamben castigates, is the opposite of this kind of intimacy because it disjoins this type of being in concert. It destabilizes not only the energy of youth, but also the political structure that is dependent on it. Thus, although Agamben’s critique preceded the current political state of affairs, it offers some understanding on the destabilizing process that may have contributed to it. Within this context, the bringing together of education, technology, and the de-politicization of students (as I termed it above) involves also the neutralization of judgment. Again, we should note how judgment for Arendt is intertwined with the type of togetherness that is crucial for democracy. Arendt’s observation that there exists a modern “fear of judging”—a fear that she associates with the rule of dictatorships (Arendt, 2003, p. 19)—is relevant, perhaps even more relevant, not only in today’s political world, but also in the current state of affairs of education that is marked by the growing appeal of social-emotional learning, the practical quest for professionalism in education, and the use of technological tools for teaching and learning.

The importance of Agamben's critique of contemporary online education should be read against this intellectual, social, educational and political background. In a series of rather dense remarks, he echoes the relationships between youth, technology, and education. He also invites a reconsideration of its political implications. In particular, Agamben presents a political-theological remark that may bring the disappearance of youth to bear on a new type of education that ceases to nurture the "visiting" of the other, the assuming of the viewpoints of fellow human beings, of other opinions, other possibilities, different social and political imaginations, that is crucial for any democratic public space. The atomization of the student through the flattening of educational interaction to images on a computer screen invites the fading away of being young and, following Agamben, of the social and political traditions that are based on its realization (mainly liberal democracy). What the flat screen may level is democracy, leaving room for the rise of new forms of political "gods", who are coming out of the shadows to haunt the world of human beings.

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