

**From holy work to playful learning?
- In praise of profanation**

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Abstract

Modern work-life and modern organization are putting claim on the total soul of employees. Self-technologies and biopolitical strategies now seems to govern the whole of our lives inside and outside work-life. Focusing on the act of profanation and 'free use' this paper examines Giorgio Agamben's concept 'form-of-life' as a counter-narrative to biopower and governmental strategies. Rather than studying the disciplinary control-mechanism of modern work-life this paper examines the concept of profane living as a way of investigating the value of work. First part examines playful learning as part of production and consumption within cultural economy. Second part examines how profanation of work confront us with the notion of 'free use', and different gestures of free use, for example play, boredom and worship. In total the paper argues how free use, the act of profanation links together work, ethos (values) and play in shaping a new type of critical management and critical ethos.

Introduction

In his series of *Homo Sacer* texts, Agamben has focused on the modern biopolitical mechanism and sovereign power's *modus operandi*. Agamben has been concerned with showing how human life within our political paradigm is reduced to 'naked life', potentiality exposed to the unjust measure of sovereign power. The hidden question in this approach is how it is possible to establish a notion of human life that challenges biopower and governmental strategies and prevents the grip of sovereign power. Agamben's contribution to this field is the concept 'form-of-life' (*forma-di-vita*) which is still a work in progress. Here Agamben is occupied with examining a life which first of all is characterized by possibilities and which can never be reduced to 'naked life'. The phenomena of play takes up a central position in Agamben's argument. Several critics, among them Catherine Mills, have reservations in this direction seeing it as a nostalgic

and idyllic state of nature. However, I want to argue that Agamben examines the ambivalent elements of play and game that are part of a long cultural and historical tradition.¹ Agamben emphasizes how play mediates between rule (form) and freedom, between subject and object. Hence, play makes it possible to imagine a practice of life first of all characterized by possibilities making it possible to think our relation to things in a new way. Play exempts things from the rules of regime, of ownership, and of utility, and instead it makes possible what Agamben calls 'free use'. In his work, Agamben cautiously delineates a positive figure of biopolitics known as form-of-life. Not to be confused with particular minorities, identities, life-styles, or unities, form-of-life always embraces many forms-of-life. Comparing work-life and monastic organisation, Agamben promotes in his later work a new dimension in which "life" as such, perhaps for the first time, is affirmed in its autonomy, and in which the claim of the "highest poverty" and "use" challenges both the law, work-life, organisations and our processes of learning in ways that we must still grapple with today. How can we think life as something not subject to ownership but only for common use? In praise of profanation is an attempt to answer these questions.

In what follows I will present Agamben's concept of 'free use' as central to the idea of form-of-life. The paper examines 'free use', or the act of profanation, as a critical gesture in transforming values of things and work from fetishism into a playful ethos. The paper then examines and exemplifies how profanation of work today confront us with the notion of 'free use', and different gestures of free use, for example play, boredom and worship.

Form-of-life

In his *Homo Sacer* series, Agamben shows how today's politics takes the form of biopolitics whose purpose it is to manage people's biological life (birth, death, health, sexuality). The basis of biopolitics is found in Aristotle's distinction between polis (city) and oikos (home), and the exclusion of natural life (zoe) from the city. The result is that the political field is established through an exclusion of natural life. When natural life nevertheless is politicized, it is due to a paradoxical mechanism: the included exclusion in which the excluded is kept and framed into the power of authority from which it is excluded. Now, according to Agamben, the basic mechanism of biopolitics is exclusion, separation, and exception, that make it possible to exclude persons from the field of politics and law and thereby reduce each from being a citizen imputed with political rights to that of 'naked life'. In our times this 'naked life' will manifest itself in different spheres and under different conditions: refugees, precarious labour, elders, single mothers, etc. However, according to Agamben this biopolitical machine can be made inefficient by establishing an understanding of human life that does not allow the

separation between zoe and bios, and that will not allow the reduction to naked life. Form-of-life points towards such a notion of human life. In *Means Without End*, he describes form-of-life as “a life that cannot be separated from its form is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself” [...] “it defines a life – human life – in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simple facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all power.”² Such a life cannot be reduced to naked life. A form of life is an integrated life understood as a way of living in which biology and culture, private and public, cannot be separated. To isolate life to privacy is part of today’s biopolitical and neoliberal governance. In giving form to life form-of-life as we shall see is also a shared type of life which has the potential to shape and change our relations and the liberal regulation of life, and hence the relation between rules and life. As David Kishik puts it:

“It becomes more and more clear these days that privacy is a thing of the past. The attempt to shield certain aspects of our existence from others is not only a lost battle; it is the wrong one. A life that cannot be separated from its form, a life where something like bare life cannot be isolated, is a life for which private existence is just an extension of public existence, and vice versa. It is a life that is always, and not only sometimes, political. Everything that pertains to our private, bare life (what we eat or drink, how or with whom we make love, how we subsist or what we consume, how we feel physically or emotionally, and other so-called domestic issues) is at stake today not merely as a precondition of our shared form of life but as part and parcel of it. In other words, what is questioned here is not really the legitimacy of the private sphere but the metaphysical distinction between the private and the public, the bourgeois division between what is only mine and what belongs to everyone.”³

According to Agamben, it is this capacity of a common free use that we have to take seriously if we wish to interrupt the way biopolitical power operates and penetrates life today. However, Agamben’s form-of-life is not equivalent to given cultural life-styles or ways of living. The point is that form-of-life puts life at stake at such, and in this way maintains freedom not in its negative notion of being free from exterior limitations reducing it to a matter of choice but freedom as a learning-process attached to one’s own negativity, what one is not. What Agamben calls potentiality. This form of freedom is a precondition for critical ethos, new values and happiness, which he, in referring to Aristotle, sees as the true task of politics.

“A life that cannot be separated from its form is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself. What does this formulation mean? It defines a life-human life-in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts, but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all power. Each behaviour and each form of human living is never prescribed by a specific biological vocation, nor is it assigned by whatever necessity; instead, no matter how customary, repeated, and socially compulsory, it always retains the character of a possibility; that is, it always puts at stake living itself. That is why human beings-as beings whose life is irremediably and painfully assigned to happiness. But this immediately constitutes the form-of-life as political life.”⁴

Agamben here points out what he means by life “being at stake.” The idea is that human life should be understood neither as a biological creature, nor as a metaphysical creature with a specific historical destiny, but it should be understood from its multiple impulses, its passions, and its idiosyncrasies. Man is first of all not an idea or a project. Neither something to presuppose, nor a task that it has to accomplish, but it is pure possibility; what Agamben calls potentiality (*potenza*). Not until man is disconnected from the ideas, assignments, and tasks, that throughout history have determined human coexistence, will he be free. According to Agamben it is the space of potentiality/possibility which here reveals itself as the field of politics because politics is essentially about the possibility of happiness. So far, this hypothesis of form-of-life is a thought experiment and Agamben asks the question whether such a form-of-life is possible beyond the grip of sovereign power:

“A political life, that is, a life directed toward the idea of happiness and cohesive with a form-of-life, is thinkable only starting from the emancipation from such a division, with the irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty. The question about the possibility of a nonstatist politics necessarily takes this form: Is today something like a form-of-life, a life for which living itself would be at stake in its own living, possible? Is today a life of power available?”⁵

The answer I will show, is how the life of power, potential life, is possible as free use, more precisely the gesture of free use’ within play, boredom and worship bringing out an ethos of value and ethos of play.

Play as profanation.

When Agamben takes up play he inscribes himself in a long philosophical and aesthetic tradition in which play is used as a starting point in thinking about life and art. The Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, described play as voluntary acts taking place within a time demarcated sphere with its own rules. A world of 'as-if' in which the players take part. His study was based on the idea that play doesn't serve a particular purpose but installs its own purpose. In contrast with other theories of play, Huizinga claims that play will not have any inherent use-value neither biological, psychological, nor educational. Despite having no inherent use-value, play nevertheless influences the basic conditions of human life. He speaks of '*homo ludens*' (playful man) in contrast to '*working man*' (*homo faber*) and '*knowledge man*'.⁶ The French writer, Roger Caillois, criticized Huizinga for narrowing down play to modes of competitions, battle, and strife. In a more expanded taxonomia of play, he distinguishes between play that governs and produces competitions, luck, mimicry, and faintness, and with play based on rules (for example, chess) and unstructured games, spontaneous games without any clear rules.⁷ Despite these differences the attraction of play as metaphor, as model, and as paradigm, is due to play being associated with freedom and play being an image for free-life development. This notion is usually associated with Friedrich Schiller who was the first to highlight play being the activity that most essentially defines the true human spirit. However, none of the above approaches to play analyse play as an ethical concept as well as additionally being a critical concept in its capacity to interrupt the continuum of time and the historical narration of economic use-value. In *Infancy and History*, Agamben discusses the relation between rites and play. Referring to Benveniste and Lévi-Strauss, he describes the relation as constitutive for our experience of historical time. Whereas rites turn events into structures, play turns structures into events. Rite makes diacronic time synchronic, whereas playing makes synchronic time diacronic.⁸ However, it is from the mutual relation between the two, between rite and play, synchronic and diacronic time, that historical time arises, as human time. Play is what interrupts the given structure so that a new experience can appear: Play acquires a liberating function. "Within play man liberates himself from sacred time and leaves it behind in human time."⁹ In his later work, *Profanation*, Agamben establishes a more explicit analogy between religion and the function of capitalism and shows how both fields have managed (and still do) to be left untouched by the free use of man. Play as profanation neutralises and deactivates what has been separated from humans and makes it available. To profane means "to open the possibility of a special form of negligence which ignores separation, or rather, puts it to a particular use."¹⁰ There is a mutual relation between the two spheres; a new use happens through deactivating an earlier use but without replacing and abolishing it completely and without

returning to some originary state of condition. Play diverts us from the sacred halo in its ideological grip without necessarily abolishing it. Agamben sets up an analogy between the function of religion, economy, law, and politics. “Just as the *religio* that is played with, but no longer observed, opens the gate to use, so the powers (*potenza*) of economics, law, and politics, deactivates in play, can become the gateways to a new happiness.”¹¹

The art of interruption: Profanation as criticism

Today, cultural economy the artistic productions of the “free use” of ready-made materials is now a common act of profanation within the music industry and other fields. Behind this de-activation of the ‘sacredness’ of innovation that leaves behind the romantic notion of the genius, we are left with a profane sphere of post-production. Profanation enters the sphere of ethics. As David Kishik puts it: “The ethical task is to profane it, use it, play with it, examine it, struggle for and against it, or even render it completely inoperative within our life, but without trying to resolve the matter once and for all.”¹² But what turns profanation into an ethico-political act? The answer, I will try to show, is related to what Walter Benjamin associated with the art of critique as “the art of interruption” and to ethos as related to Agamben’s concept of impotence and potentiality. According to Benjamin, the art of critique addresses how transformational forces actualize and reposition things and contexts. Critique can neither be fixated nor reach a final point but is continuous dialectic engagement. Rather than accepting things as they are, critique is about never letting history be. It is our way of being conscious of the *impermanence of things* that sets the agenda for the task of profanation. Going back to Benjamin’s idea of critique as “the art of interruption and destruction”, the idea of profanation replaces the originality of things and history with a sense of the provisional and temporariness of things. In his famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin reminds us of how the notion of the historical originality of art and things goes back to the cultic ritual and later the romantic sentimentality of beauty and commodity fetishism of capitalism. And yet the new modes of reproductions embrace a new act of valorisation. Decisive is the replacement of the originality of things and history with a sense the provisional and the temporary. It is in the afterlife of things and history that we come to understand their reality. The age of reproduction is not only a time of new mechanics, but a time for new definitions. The invention of photography not only created new possibilities for copying the visual but new ways of relating to the visual, a new way of thinking about what it means to see. From this dialectic engagement, the truth of objects and history can only be divulged by way of its (after) life, the ways in which the thing in between constellations slowly accrued it’s meaning. The way in which things

gather and accumulate their sense from surroundings, acquiring new use, curiosity, and play.

The task of criticism is an activity that destroys and interrupts the object only to reshape its form in new constellations. In a recent published book, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*.¹³, Eiland and Jennings suggest three aspects as crucial for Benjamin's sense of critical life: The art of interruption and ruination; secondly, the phenomenology of everyday life, and thirdly the fragment as a principle of writing history. The dialectic image, the literary snapshot, tries to capture a moment saturated with meaning and hold it firmly to be able to see it in its totality.¹⁴ The important point is how interruption destroys history in its continuum, trying to capture it in its slow becoming and dissolution, its natural progression in which reality comes into being and acquires a new life. A friend of mine who lives in Detroit describes it as a place where old abandoned industrial-factories become real through a new social use. Everyday life and fragmentary experience comes together: Here we can think of the phenomenology of everyday life in which old things that fall into the hands of children – an old car, a firearm, or a legal contract – are things that they play with, and are things we tend to think about as serious. What is common to these cases and the profanation of the sacred is a break with the holy fetish of the commodity or the ideology that tends to surround the authority of things with a specific aura. In fact, the unique element of a thing does not become itself until it has undergone a period of ruination during which the shiny surface of an ideology of the origin has been stripped off of it, and an amount of the grime of lived reality has gathered in its place. It is this ruination that creates the possibility of talking of innovation of things as an act of profanation and ethos rather than the ideology surrounding it.

Here, the art of interruption is central for it is in the process of pausing, of giving pause, that things can develop. Innovation, or the unique quality of things, must, paradoxically, be interrupted in order to become meaningful. We now see a clear connection between Benjamin's description of history as a train, and revolution being the break that makes it stop, for everyday life, to the micro-gaze on things, to the life of things, the process of pausing, of giving pause, from which things can develop. Within the act of interruption the critique pays attention to "the banal and the creaturely."¹⁵ The originality of history and things is post-original. In this engagement, Benjamin and Agamben attribute innovation and value to the *afterlife* of things; a combination of post-production and post-originality.¹⁶

The task of criticism would be to ask new questions based on *profane interruptions* connecting it to everyday life. Here, nothing is sacred; For example, to imagine profanation of private property we should combine the art of

interruption with an understanding of everyday life and its fragmentary character. We should probably begin with a different sense of giving things back and sharing. The Danish scientist Tor Nørretranders has suggested that instead of buying a new sofa every five years, throwing away the old one, we ought to rent it and give it back to for example IKEA when we are done with it. The profanation of private property has to do with enacting a form-of-life that breaks the logic of consumption-disposal (buying-throwing away) but by free use.¹⁷ Would it be possible to imagine a profanation of energy-resource connecting it to an act of interruption and everyday life? If so, rather than relying on technological instrumental reduction of carbon in the atmosphere, the act of profanation (and interruption) would try to connect sustainability as form-of-life to our profane world of enjoyment and experimentation: We should take our bike to work not because it reduces the use of carbon energy but because it is connected to a living internalised ethos of enjoyment. We should buy used Vintage cloths not because someone tells us to but because it has become a way of playing with old clothes as a way of living. Profanation of the way we live is an exercise in living itself, a demanding, phenomenological process of confronting our basic values and the values of our values.

The ethos of profanation

However, as Agamben emphasizes, play as a mechanism for profanation is in decay or under severe pressure. It seems as if modern man is incapable of playing. The enormous number of games entering the culture is a proof in itself. Not surprisingly, many people are looking for an attachment in old rituals and traditions through games and playing. According to Agamben, this is precisely the opposite of the function of play. As he says: “To return to play its purely profane vocation is a political task.”¹⁸ The problem is that capitalism has specialised in capturing the things and activities that serve profanation. Games, media, language, and images today serve capitalism and, in addition to this, modern work life. They all contribute to consuming and only in a very limited manner to free use. Biopolitical governance has today become inseparable from capitalism of the spectacle. The demand of spectacular exhibition has made it impossible to profane, or at least, it requires something special, as Agamben says.¹⁹ What is important in profanation is not play as such but *the event of subjectification and learning processes* attached to this human experience.

This brings us to profanation as an ethical problem. The ethos of profanation begins with the ethical question; What does it mean to say “I can?” Human beings are capable of two forms of capacities (potenza): negative capacity and positive

capacity. The latter is the capacity to do something, whereas the former is the capacity not to do something. Whereas animals, because of their strong instincts, are one with what is their nature, humans are attached to their own negativity, that is, a fundamental sense of possibility, a sense of potentiality in which it is part of its being to be able to act without knowing the result, to abstain from doing things while doing it, to take up some other paths, etc. As Agamben puts it: “There is an operation of power that does not immediately affect what humans can do –their potentiality- but rather their ‘im-potentiality’, that is, what they cannot do, or better, can not do.”²⁰ And: “this exposes them, more than any other living being, to the risk of error; but, at the same time, it permits human beings to accumulate and freely master their own capacities, to transform them into “faculties”.”²¹ He continues with what is worth considering more closely:

“It is on this other, more obscure, face of potentiality that today the power one ironically defines as “democratic” prefers to act. It separates humans not only and not so much from what they can do but primarily and for the most part from what they can not do. Separated from his im-potentiality, deprived of the experience of what he can not do, today’s man believes himself capable of everything, and so he repeats his jovial “no problem,” and his irresponsible “I can do I,” precisely when he should instead realize that he has been consigned in unheard of measure to forces and processes over which he has lost all control. He has become blind not to his capacities but to his incapacities, not to what he can do but to what he cannot, or can not, do.”²²

The ethos of profanation focuses on impotence as a strategy of play. The capacity to play is a negative capacity, the capacity to find a new dimension of use. As for “children, who play with whatever old thing falls into their hands, making toys out of it that belong to the spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities that we are used to thinking about as serious. All of a sudden, a car, a firearm, or a legal contract becomes a toy.”²³ The point is that use is always a relation with something that cannot be appropriated; “it refers to things insofar as they cannot become objects of possessions.”²⁴ Impotence, the ethical capacity of potential being, lies at the heart of play, since it reveals the negative capacity to let go, to dwell, to wonder about the given things, to struggle, to hesitate, and also to say no. True playing doesn’t treat things as means to an immediate end. True playing says no to what it already knows. True playing interrupts the sacred game of instrumental capitalism, our commodity utility and positive potens of production and acceleration. In his book *Society of Fatigue* the German-South-Korean philosopher Byung Chul-Han refers to the excess of positivity and production as “a world which is poor of interruptions, poor of intervals and what lies in

between. Acceleration abolishes all intervals. Not to be able to say stop is the mechanism of stupidity”.²⁵ Negative capacity is the eye’s capacity not to see the blinking LED on your smartphone. It is the capacity to let go, to dwell, to struggle, to hesitate, to say no. And yet, negative capacity is not incapacity. It connects our form-of-life to a sense of deep attention. It is to this ethos of profanation, and its political vocation, that we shall now examine.

Holy work, or the profanation of work

‘Lazy Robert’ was the name given to one of the most newsworthy stories last year in Denmark. Robert, his real name, succeeded living on meagre welfare for eight years without entering the job-market. ‘Lazy Robert simply refused to take the work offered to him, calling it “work without dignity.” He refused to take work in which he would be ordered around to perform stupid activities like an animal whose only function is to be controlled. Declaring that he rather preferred not to be available for the job market, Lazy Robert was met by the moralistic indignation that drives biopolitics today. There was not even a rational economic reaction and argument. Economic experts could tell us that in a small open economy like Denmark’s, there has to be a minimum of unemployment of at least three percent to avoid pushing the salaries into a uncompetitive level, and the three percent should be those with the lowest qualified working capacity. Yet, no one (politicians, media-intellectuals, etc.) supported this argument. On the contrary, moral statements condemning Robert as being a solitary parasite, a lazy tramp, dominated the discourse.

The case exemplifies a development in which existence is seen as a moral qualification based on productivity: produce or disappear. Every individual is measured in simple economic binary codes: profit/loss, that is, quantification. In the neoliberal regime of self-management, growth is elevated to a moral paradigm. It becomes an individual responsibility to supply a profit based on one’s individual existence. In its demand of constant activity and production, the society of achievement, (Chul Han), is based on a moral or rather moralistic foundation which lies at the heart of neoliberal biopolitical discourse. The call for slowness, hesitation, withdrawal, im-potentiality, are features that are met with suspicion. Biopolitical discourse connects the self to the market as a productive machine. The paradox is clear; Self-realization for the modern knowledge worker is not about inner freedom and ethos but it is based on the narrative construction called “Production and constant positivity.” In a TV-appearance ‘Lazy Robert’s argument about how taking care of his daughter and being an active author of political discussions on a website in itself is a contribution to the values of society, was not unsurprisingly met with a shake of the head. The

protestant regime of resentment filled the newspapers and television calling Robert "Lazy" telling him to take his part of the work-obligation for the benefit of society. Three basic assumptions seem to govern the debate that became a nation-wide issue: (1) A protestant ethics; Since I am getting up every morning working hard and sweating, you are not allowed to get any welfare money if you are not accepting a job, no matter stupid and futile, that is offered to you. (2) Relevant values for society are only economic values, and (3) The sacredness of work structures our view of a still more irrational economy. Ironically, Robert became a celebrity and for a period he was offered a role in the Robinson Expedition Reality Show! The point is, however, that today 'the sacredness' of work actually structures the protestant ethics and the notion of values. The sacredness of work creates it's own rules. What is the mood of the profanation of work?

In today's capitalism, the engagement of individualized activities - 'competence', 'lifelong learning', 'creativity', and 'self-management' - combines biopolitical governance and the sacredness of work. The aura of this sacralisation has many names: self-realization, creativity, personal motivation, innovation, positive psychology or positive thinking. In fact, a still more expanding part of knowledge-work has to do with creating language-games of seduction; selling yourself through narratives, through digital shows of visibilities and experiences about yourself, your last accomplishment, your circles, your last favourite restaurant, your last trip to the Maldives, etc., all being part of your work-identity. We are all becoming small advertising machines. Experience-economy extends the consuming attitude whose primary focus is not the quality and substance of your experience but about seeing yourself experience things; not having been to Greenland but seeing myself having been to Greenland. This is why consumption as narrative has become such a huge part of immaterial economy, capitalism, working-policy, and insecurity in labour-rights. This is why, as Agamben will emphasise again and again, the spectacle of capitalism has made it almost impossible to profane, to play.

Behind the aura the charade, the chimera of empty labour becomes everywhere more and more visible, the game for its own sake, the great drama of production (think about the TV-series *The Office*.), is about producing without producing any new values but only to keep the wheel turning. Work as work is hidden behind an ever more extremely empty rhetoric of game, innovation, creativity, team-building, and network. Instead of focusing on the quality and the core of work, we tend to wrap it into a language of chimera that operates as a language of control. Play, art, even love, have now entered capitalism and work life as the norm for the ever expanding and producing individual. The results are well known: Pathologies of

stress, burn out, depression, and cynicism are now permeating the field. What makes profanation difficult is today's excess of positivity; a one-sided sense of capacity directed towards doing, towards producing, constantly being "on", a hyper-attentive attitude saying "Yes we can!", or "I can do it!" In *Society of Fatigue* Byung-Chul Han argues how achievement society has replaced disciplinary society.²⁶ Achievement society has replaced the "Thou shalt not" of disciplinary society with the affirmation "Yes, we can!" The entrepreneurial subject of achievement society does not need commandments—it has projects. Han writes: "Disciplinary society is dominated by the No. Its negativity creates the insane and criminals. Achievement society, in contrast, gives rise to depressives and failures."²⁷ These shifts notwithstanding, Han points out one important aspect of continuity that persists in the social unconscious; the drive to maximize production. A society founded upon positivity and affirmation is simply more productive. In other words, the transition is not a break. He does not argue that everything is different or that we are free of disciplinary commandments. When we say: "Yes we can!" we already have learned that we shall. Thus, the entrepreneurial subject of achievement society is in a situation of "paradoxical freedom."²⁸ In achievement society, the capacity of creating shared experimental bonds, the free use of profanation, is in severe danger because of the incessant command to produce. In other words, the paradox can be expressed like this: We may be free to undertake any conceivable venture, but as a result, we lose our soul—or rather, we burn out. The paradox of freedom is nicely captured in this observation: "The complaint of the depressive individual *Nothing is possible* is only possible in a society that believes *Nothing is impossible*."²⁹ The one who only possesses the potens of doing something is helplessly exposed to pressing impulses excluding the power of reflection and inventive playfulness.

Profanation: Boredom and pause as interruption

Byung-Chul Han argues that the potens of constantly doing something leads to exhaustion (the depressive fatigue) whereas inventive playfulness is connected to a particular mode of inspiration rising from what the Austrian writer Peter Handke calls 'conciliative fatigue' – a mode of impotence as a deeper form of attention. In referring to Walter Benjamin, Han calls this conciliative fatigue "deep boredom": a boredom that is different from 'simple boredom'. Simple boredom sets the agenda of our lives today based on the need of constant stimuli, television, navigation on the net, etc. – all this to keep boredom at bay, to simply waste time. The best escape is to fill ourselves with stimuli. This type of boredom captures a number of more or less pathological elements ranging from depression and exhaustion to frustration and abundance. Achievement-society of biopolitical capitalism gives rise to most of these emotions all of which has a tendency to

isolate individuals from each other. "I alone am responsible for my depression and exhaustion at the job. Please doctor, give me some pills." The legal and common use of a union is now being overruled by the production regime of achievement society. Biopolitical governance creates individual solutions to collective problems. Also known as: The pill-syndrome-society. The pathology of this type of boredom pushes you forward not to be a failure. Hence, Kierkegaard among others spoke about idleness and boredom as the root of all evil. Several writers, among them Toohey and Goodstein, argue that the acceleration of boredom is related to our increased wealth and individualism of the last century.³⁰ Yet, boredom has a long history attached to melancholy and *acardia* (idleness) as one of the worst seven deadly sins.³¹ The German artist Anselm Kiefer says that it was the experience of boredom as a child that made him realize the potential of the strange, magical, open world of art. Heidegger used the German word *langeweile* referring to an empty time that today appears threatening. Time as a pastime occupies a central category. We take the smartphone and we begin surfing the net, Facebook, etc. What has changed is our way of managing boredom. Instead of listening to it, we escape it with electronic anaesthetics and other dispositive devices that we never seem to be able to escape. Hence, we are constantly oscillating between a de-subjectification and re-subjectification.³² In this way boredom comes to dominate us even more. Rather than referring to an existential heroic loneliness (Sartre, Kierkegaard) according to Toohey modern urban life and its fragmentary everyday experience has democratized boredom making it indistinguishable from our everyday life experience and life perspective. At one point more invisible and yet its mode of experience seems to have been intensified within other life-style related work-life diseases such as tiredness, exhaustion, restlessness and indifference.³³ Hence, we should be more sensitive to the potential of interruptions in work and in our mode of productions.

The Austrian writer Peter Handke makes the distinction between divisive (simple boredom) and conciliative fatigue, referred to by Chul Han as what Benjamin called 'deep boredom'.³⁴ Deep boredom captures a certain gesture of hesitation of the profane act. Deep boredom introduces the negativity of interruption into the infinite succession of one-damn-thing-after-the-other. A lot of what we associate with the authentic, such as anger, sorrow, and angst, are determined by a certain element of negativity of otherness that society of achievement and its excess of positivity are neglecting. Instead we tend to refuse insecurity, boredom, and coming face to face with our own subjectivity that connects us to a deeper personality, that the so-called 'authentic' categories wants to express. However, it is, I shall argue, this sense of impotence, this sense of deep boredom that connects us to another kind of tiredness, and hence a potential field of actions.

The tired one is closer to his own negativity; the passage of ethos. Conciliative fatigue opens up a space of communication by loosening the grip of the ego and making it porous. Handke emphasises that this kind of fatigue is inspiring: It inspires a certain composure and playfulness. According to Byung-Chul Han this more inspiring sense of fatigue opens up a passage within boredom connected to a slower epic-like sense of experience. As Walter Benjamin puts it in his famous essay “The Storyteller”, “Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places—the activities that are intimately associated with boredom—are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well.”³⁵ Hence, the gift of deep boredom is attached to the gesture of hesitation and to the gift of listening, and therefore it is a presupposition for the “community of listeners”. The gift of listening presupposes a more contemplative mode of attention that today is still to a large extent out of sync with the demand of constant active production formed by the sacredness of work.

Whereas hyper-attention and productivity-regime produces a fatigue of isolation, the mode of deep boredom gives rise to a mode of being-together in which we are more receptive to people and things around us. The more receptive, the more easily it is for other people to enter you. This kind of *active passivity* creates a kind of awareness, another kind of attention that avoids the short forms of hyper-attention that Byung Chul Han attaches to achievement-society. Deep tiredness makes people capable of staying longer in their mode of potentiality. Not necessarily to remain there but to affirm the ability not to rush towards actualizing things before them. This capacity of one’s own impotence creates a kind of visibility for life-potentials and other outcomes not being exhausted in actual goals or in things ready at hand. Conciliative tiredness embraces a search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living.³⁶ The receptive mode is the passage to ethos. In Handke’s beautiful words:

“Tiredness is the angel who touches the fingers of the one dreaming king, while the other kings go on sleeping dreamlessly. Healthy tiredness is in itself recovery. A certain tired man can be seen as a new Orpheus; the wildest beast gather around him and are at last able to join in his tiredness is his tiredness. (...) “The tired Odysseus won the love of Nausica. Tiredness makes you younger than you ever have been. Tiredness is greater than the self. Everything become extraordinary in the tranquility of tiredness-how extraordinary, for instance, is the bundle of paper which the astonishingly easy-going man over there is carrying across the astonishingly quiet Calle Cervantes. Epitome of tiredness.”³⁷

This inspiration is not unimportant for creative processes and the capacity for creating a common free use. In their case-study of *Enduring Boredom*, Bård Mæland & Paul Otto Brunstad show how soldiers and students have to cope with boredom in a productive way as part of their learning-processes.³⁸ They do characterise boredom as a discipline we have to master and endure. Certain energy is part of boredom that we are in danger of losing. Their study shows how boredom is a free space between impulse and action, and, hence, necessary something that can be managed with sensitivity. In other words, deep boredom is a necessary presupposition for creativity and reflection. Nietzsche described boredom as the threshold for great deeds. In exercising the capacity of learning, it is endurance and maturity rather than speed that is important. This capacity might be experienced as boring repetition. In his book *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett sees repetition as the most important aspect of the development of skills and the management of craft. To be a master of any discipline – be it a violinist, a carpenter, or a writer – one has to go through several stages of boring repetition.³⁹ Yet, the point of virtuosity is followed by a capacity in which the skilled craftsman can go on and repeat the same act without getting bored.⁴⁰

The gesture of worship

According to Martin Luther, the best way to serve God is to dedicate oneself to a profession. Not only did God demand daily prayer and occasional good deeds towards one's neighbours but also a life primarily based on work and worship. Luther took the ideal of monastic life dedicated in worshipping God, and he removed it from the walls of the monastery and transformed it into a universal ethics of labour. Luther converted monastic life and its disciplinary machinery to the outside society. Despite a clear difference between the societies of Northern European Lutherans and the Southern European Catholics, they share the same ambition of including all life under a rule. Today this so-called 'rule' will have different manifestations: Loyalty towards your company or organisation; the rule of certain types of production within academia; the rule of efficiency combining law and new public management (NPM) more concerned with documentation and registration of what you do and how much you do (a new law in Denmark requires the midwife to focus on how many births she has managed per day and not the quality of it, the basic quality of the work as such.)

But what would it mean to speak of life, work life and organisational life as something that cannot be owned either by oneself, or by any other. That life, in Agamben's words is something we discover in a common use? In his book *The Highest Poverty. Monastic Rules and Form-of-life* Agamben discusses the power of free use within the catholic church organisation. The transformative story of

worship is the story of the Franciscan monk. The Franciscan monk devoted himself to a life of poverty seeking to establish a life outside the range of law, outside the church-organisation. They challenged the law in a very fundamental way: They overruled the political and ecclesiastical authority insisting on organizing life based on the example on Jesus alone. This meant rejecting private property and rights as such. Agamben writes what he calls 'an archaeology for catholic monk-culture' combining the language games of law with the language games of work-life and modern organization. The point of this historical work is not to return to a hidden voice attached to the past that rests in a chronological given past time separated from us and objectified in the form of historical sources. Rather, the dialogue with history intervenes in our present experience as part of the lived and unlived experience. The present time is divided between a lived and un-lived experience. The experience we are living, and which is present for us in 'the now', is also an experience that contains a past that has never been lived and that can never be understood as such. This is why the question of what it means to be contemporary is such an urgent task for Agamben, a task always an act of embracing the untimely, the dark negativity that lies at the heart of profanation.⁴¹

The Franciscan monk sheds light over actual phenomena such as work and life, rule and life, and power and life. What characterized the Franciscan culture was a specific practice that challenges what we mean by rule itself within an organisation. First of all, the word 'practice' cannot be associated with a cultural sociological field-study naming practice as simply something to observe. 'Practice' in the Franciscan sense extends the concept by connecting it to a mode of existence itself. This affects the relation between practice and rule. The life-practice of the Franciscan didn't see rules as a regulating tool outside life. Rather, a 'rule' could not be separated from the form and the expression it was given in the free use. That is, form of life. According to Francis of Assisi, the strict doctrinal worship of God divided the day into strict rules. However, to Francis, love was not the life under the code but a form-of-life. Devotion and love is first of all a concrete practice of life as such, a form of living. This breakaway group within the catholic monastic culture of strict organisation could not embrace a particular identity monitored from the already established rules incarnated in daily ceremonies and liturgies. According to Francis, these rules became an obstacle to taking the possibilities of the life of love serious. The point was that the given rules are not exhausted, that there are other possibilities of life attached to the same belief, the same faith. But not only that, and this is what makes the free use of Francis so radical and consistent, you only take faith serious by putting it at stake in your very way of living. Hence, form-of-life is always attached to the potentialities of life. This is what Agamben means by the

word 'practice'. Practice is never simply a number of actions fulfilling a particular goal or safeguarding a profit.

The practice of the form-of-life is the place of experimenting and investigating a possible access to a phenomenological living act of ethos. An act of profanation within the holiness of organisation. A gesture of free use as a true investigation of the values of the organisation. Foremost, the Franciscans made claim to a mode of living, and not a doctrine. According to Agamben, they were in a sense the first to "discover life"⁴² The inspiration of Francis for so many generations is usually referred to as 'the living truth'. The precise point of this is not simply to follow the experience as a rule-based practice, but it is to practice the experience that also includes finding new forms of expressions to this life. Not only to know with your heart, to live the life prayer, but to give life flesh. To find a practice that rediscovers life by rediscovering values in a new form. The practice of the form-of-life is the ethos in taking life seriously. In taking our lives seriously, we have to turn towards our capacity, our *potentia*. In this sense the way of living (our form of life) uses the rule as guidance (and not a statute alone). Hence, our relations to things are characterized by use and not as private property. Next to the relation of rule and life, Agamben introduces a third element: use. Traditionally, the opposition between rule and life sees rules as universal and life as attached to the singular (particular) human. The problem, however, is that both the universal and the singular (particular) are treated as two given factors. Use on the other hand makes space for a third element, that is, practice as gesture. 'Gesture' is a name used by Agamben to address this element of praxis. If production is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the gesture then breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, *as such*, evade the orbit of modality without becoming, for this reason, ends."⁴³ "Gesture," Agamben writes, "is the name of the name of this intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution".⁴⁴ The gesture of worship is here treated as a creative act that changes the direction of the rule within the organisation.

Living in the curious unfolding, play becomes the strongest image of what is most human. The lesson of Francis was to relate our own existence and turn the gaze towards basic values in a critical questioning. Hence, form-of-life becomes the place a critical communication of values connected to our mode of living. The potentiality of work and here worship turns powerlessness into power. To be the cause of one's own actions (*causa sui*). To confront ourselves as creatures of possibility is similar to take responsibility not only our own life but the life of others. According to Agamben, form-of-life is a concept for ethical difference, the practice of taking life seriously. To pose once again the question of the values that

guides our common tasks. Form-of-life is this questioning of values in relation to the given rules a given organisation. Agamben's take on Francis is a reminder that we will never be done with the past. Form-of-life is a struggle of regaining our access to history in rediscovering values in a new common free use. History, the forgotten ways of living or the traumas and episodes we want to forget, always intervenes into the present time that we live. But instead of neglecting this element of negativity, this darkness, this otherness of our present, "the contemporary", Agamben writes, "is the person who perceives the darkness of his time as something that concerns him, as something that never ceases to engage him. Darkness is something that - more than any light - turns directly and singularly toward him. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time."⁴⁵ The struggle of free use is an attempt to gain access to our contemporary life. "It is in this sense that one can say that the entry point to the present necessarily takes the form of an archaeology; an archaeology that does not, however, regress to a historical past, but returns to that part within the present we are absolutely incapable of living. What remains un-lived therefore is incessantly sucked back toward the origin, without ever being able to reach it. The present is nothing other than this un-lived element in everything that is lived. That which impedes access to the present is precisely the mass of what for some reason (its traumatic character, its excessive nearness) we have not managed to live."⁴⁶

Conclusion

Focusing on the act of profanation and 'free use' this paper has investigated form-of-life as a counter-narrative to biopower and governmental strategies. First step established a critical ethos based on the act of profanation attached to a practice of playful learning taking place inside the operations of late-capitalism and the new mode of production. The paper then examined and exemplified how profanation of work today confront us with the notion of 'free use', and different gestures of free use, for example play, boredom and worship. In total the paper has argued how free use, the act of profanation links together work, ethos (values) and play.

¹ Many writers and thinkers from Kant, Schiller, Schlegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Dewey, Huizinga, Gadamer,

² Giorgio Agamben: *Means without end*. University of Minnesota Press. p. 4-9.

³ David Kishik: *The power of life. Agamben and the life of power*. Stanford University Press. 2012. p. 107-108.

⁴ Agamben: *Means without end*. Op.cit. p. 4.

⁵ Ibid. p. 8-9.

⁶ Johan Huizinga: *Homo ludens. A Study in the Play-Element in Culture*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. London. 1949.

⁷ Roger Caillois: *Man, Play and Games*. Illinois University Press. 1961. Chapt. 2.

⁸ Giorgio Agamben: *Infancy and History, Essays on the Destruction of Experience*. Verso. 1993. Op.cit. p. 73-74.

⁹ Ibid. p. 83.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben. Zone Books. 2004. Profanation. p. 75.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 76.

¹² David Kishik: *The Power of life. Agamben and the coming politics*. Op.cit. p. 83.

¹³ Se over, s. 111.

¹⁴ In his preface to *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* Benjamin emphasized how thinking not only has to capture thought in its movement but also to fixate it. "The tendency of all philosophical conceptualization is thus redefined in the old sense: to establish the becoming of phenomena in their being. For in the science of philosophy the concept of being is not satisfied by the phenomenon until it has absorbed all its history. In such investigations this historical perspective can be extended, into the past or the future, without being subject to any limits of principle." (...) "The idea as a monad." Prologue, p. 47. W. Benjamin: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. (1998) Verso. New York.

¹⁵ Eiland & Jennings writes: *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. Harvard University Press. 2014. p. 168. Eric Santner defines the "creaturely, as a new social (or better, biopolitical) constellation...", "a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field." Santner speaks about human trash and outcasts. But the creaturely constellations goes beyond the human. W.G. Sebald uses the term 'After nature' as a profane description and characterization of postwar Europa. Se Eric Santner: *On Creaturely Life*, Chicago University Press. 2006. Preface xix.

¹⁶ Rehn, Alf & Vachhani, Sheena (2006) 'Innovation and the Post-Original: On Moral Stances and Reproduction', *Creativity and innovation Management* 15 (3).

¹⁷ Tor Nørretranders: *Vær nær*. 2012.

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben: *Profanations*. Op.cit. p. 77.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 82.

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben: *Nudities*. Stanford University Press. 2011. p. 43.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. 76.

²⁴ Ibid. 83.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 45.

²⁶ So far I will refer to the pagenummer from the danish translation of Byung-Chul Han: *Træthedssamfundet*.(Eng. Society of Fatigue). Møller forlag. 2012. p. 12. Original german version: *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*. Matthes & Seitz Berlin. 2010.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 22.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 23.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 42.

³⁰ P.Toohy: *Boredom. (2012) A Lively History*. Yale University Press; Goodstein, E.S. (2005) *Experience without qualities – boredom and modernity*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

³¹ Boredom has its history. The acceleration of boredom takes place in the 20th century. Its modern expression however refers back to 1800-century as a product of the enlightenment era in Europe, the changes following industrial society and the fragmentary experience and ways of living of urban life. However, boredom has its place also in the antique although in a different mode. In the early medieval periode *acedia* coming from greek *kédos* means caring, reflection. With the prefix a- the form becomes negative. *Acedia* refers to a lack of interest for the world or a world-weary attitude to one's surroundings and was seen as one of the seven mortal sins. By the church-father Evagrius Ponticus (35-399 e.k.) *acedia* was seen as a demonic suffering. A demon that attacks the monk around midday and robs the world of meaning and substance. In contrast to the psychological element of boredom *acedia* referred to being moral unstable giving the monk the responsibility for this volatile state of being. While we tend to speak of boredom as something that happens to us *acedia* is something you commit. The monk was sinful since *acedia* with its spiritual and moral apathy removed him from the glory and grace of God. Only through prayer and hard work is it possible to fight against this condition. The French word *ennui* from around twelve century comes from the latin *inodiare*, meaning 'to hold hate for' or in *odio esse* 'to be an object of hate'. More severe than *acedia* and melancholy *ennui* activates a kind of hate towards to the world and to oneself. Other close related terms such as the english *annoy* (irritation or fury) or *spleen*, also called the english plague has its romantic equivalent counterpart in its distaste for life and apathy. For a good examination of the history of boredom; see Goodstein: *Experience without qualities – boredom and modernity*, Op.cit.

³² See Agamben: 'What is an apparatus?' in *What is an Apparatus?* Stanford University Press. 2007. The mobile-addiction causes a kind of state of exception leaving us immune to other people in public space and closes us off becoming less and less receptive.

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- ³³ See P. Toohey: *Boredom. A lively history*. Op.cit. Ch. 1 and 5.
- ³⁴ Peter Handke: 'On Tiredness' in *The Jukebox & other essays*. NY 1994. p. 137.
- ³⁵ Benjamin: 'The Storyteller'. Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' in *Illuminations. Walter Benjamin. Essays and Reflections*. Schocken Books. NY. 1968. p. 91.
- ³⁶ Calvino: *Six Memos for the next Millennium*. Faber & Faber. London.1985.
- ³⁷ Handke, Op.cit. p. 41.
- ³⁸ Bård Mæland & Paul Otto Brunstad: *Enduring Military Boredom. From 1750 to the present*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2009. Op.cit. p. 62ff.
- ³⁹ Richard Sennett: *The Craftsman*, Yale University Press. 2009. p.33.
- ⁴⁰ In his book *The Idea of Prose* Agamben argues how the gesture of hesitation isolates the power of potentiality from its act, from its final actualization. The political *potentia* of the act of experimenting with language and prose rests on this capacity of maintaining potentiality in the gesture of hesitation. In particular on the relation between potentiality and hesitation, see p. 64.
- ⁴¹ See Agamben: 'What is the Contemporary?', in *What is an Apparatus?* Op.cit.
- ⁴² Giorgio Agamben: *The Highest Poverty. Monastic Rules and Form-of-life*. Stanford University Press. 2013. s. 94.
- ⁴³ Giorgio Agamben: Notes on Gesture, in *Means without end*. Minnesota University Press. 2000. P. 100.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 101.
- ⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben: 'What is the Contemporary?', in *What is an Apparatus?* Op.cit. p. 45.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid. 51.