

ARTICLE

A Messianic Life Can Be Lived Rightly: Democracy contra the Capitalist-Sovereign Order

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Abstract

Liberal democracy is far from being the ideal form of democracy. In liberal democracies, every aspect of the individual's life is heteronomous to the forces of the state and capitalism. From biopolitics to necropolitics, the cycle of people's lives in contemporary liberal democracies is administered and controlled constantly, from beginning to end. This essay examines the works of Giorgio Agamben, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin to find an inspiration for a radical form of democracy. After engaging with the three intellectuals, the essay proposes a different conception of democracy as a possible form of messianic life/existence that interrupts the predominant flow of life. This possible democratic life/existence deactivates and suspends the structures of domination in the contemporary world, i.e. the laws of sovereignty and capital. The essay starts by providing a critique of liberal democracy and exemplifies the impossibility of a genuine democracy in this form of governance by using Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, Agamben's bare life, and Adorno's administered society. After this critique, the essay conceptualizes a democratic state of existence to potentially negate the domination of the status quo through Adorno's philosophical reflection on the "wrong life", Agamben's ideas (particularly his messianism and form of life), and Benjamin's messianic politics.

Keywords

Democracy, sovereignty, capitalism, biopolitics, necropolitics, messianism

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24132/cejop_2021_9

How to cite: Mikhail, M. 2021. "A Messianic Life Can Be Lived Rightly: Democracy contra the Capitalist-Sovereign Order." *Central European Journal of Politics* 7 (2): 64–75. DOI: 10.24132/cejop_2021_9

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1. Introduction

The word democracy became a stable term in today's political environment. Democracy is usually associated with the politics of elections and parties. In the mainstream conception, liberal democracy is the ideal mode of government and it is usually contrasted with authoritarianism or totalitarianism. This may appear as valid at first, but throughout this article, it is going to be exemplified that both forms of governance share many commonalities. Furthermore, this essay is not going to limit the concept of democracy to a mere mode of governance. This analysis is going to exemplify the genuine emancipatory richness of this term which was hindered for a long time, and its possible implications on the lives of the people. This essay is going to offer a critique to what is known as liberal democracy by exposing its undemocratic nature. Moreover, this essay is going to provide an alternative form of democracy. This article argues that liberal democracy is fundamentally a mode of administration over life and death. Furthermore, this essay argues that democracy should be understood as a suspended messianic form of life or a state of being which interrupts and deactivates the predominant continuum and structures of power, which are essentially capitalism and sovereignty.

First, a critique of democracy is going to be discussed by engaging with Michel Foucault's notions of biopolitics and governmentality to illustrate the regulation of life under the liberal regime of governance. Then Giorgio Agamben's bare life and Achille Mbembe's necropolitics are going to be discussed to show the violent forms of power that the populations are subjugated to in liberal democracies. Moreover, Adorno's critique of the administered life under capitalism is going to be examined. The second section of the paper is going to discuss Walter Benjamin messianic politics. Moreover, the section is going to explore Adorno's ethics and views on life. Finally, Agamben's thought on messianism and potentiality is going to be explored. By synthesizing these philosophical approaches, a different conception of a radical form of messianic democracy will be reached.

2. The administrative democracy

Before addressing the critique of liberal democracy, an overview of the approaches to democracy and life are going to be examined first. Traditionally the relation between life and democracy had been confined within the liberal democratic context. This conception claims that civic life and political participation in public affairs are essential to a democratic form of governance (Putnam 1993). On the other hand, John Dewey (2021: 59–66) perceived democracy not just as an institutional paradigm, but as a way of life. An egalitarian principal that guides the personal lives of individuals. Despite the slightly different approaches, this liberal conception of life and democracy contains serious flaws. Although, Dewey provides a more radical version of traditional liberal democracy;

nonetheless, he embraced the philosophy of democratic liberalism (Bernstein 2000; Shusterman 1994). In later discussions, it will be exemplified that the liberal democratic governance and genuine democracy are inherently contradictory. Moreover, there is a greater problem regarding this approach. As Antonio Gramsci argued, the ruling class in capitalism utilizes ideological means through civil society to sustain its cultural hegemony over the masses (Anderson 2017: 61). Louis Althusser (1971: 174–183) also refers to a process he termed as interpellation which transforms the individuals into subjects of the dominant ideology. It is a process of identification with the dominant ideology to create an illusion of freedom as a facade for the domination of capitalism. This process is manifested in everyday practices. Thus, following this analysis, when liberals associate life with liberal democracy, they solidify and diffuse the regime of domination in the society. Hence, increasing the subordination of the masses.

Some critical scholars theorized a synthesis between democracy and biopolitics. Some scholars advocated a form of a democratic biopolitics or a radical grass-root form of biopolitics (Prozorov 2017, 2019; Schubert 2019; Sotiris 2020a; 2020b). However, despite their commitment to theorize a democratic alternative different from the undemocratic status quo, there are several problems in their approaches. First, they assume that the positive aspects of biopolitics (e.g. the preservation of life) are idiosyncratic to the biopolitical system. This is fundamentally false. The other issue with this argument is that it attempts to reform an antidemocratic regime instead of abandoning it all together, in favor a revolutionary democratic alternative. Furthermore, this approach proposes a mode of organization that is non-coercive/pervasive and governed by public sovereignty. This raises the question whether it renders biopolitical anymore. Most of them also fail to consider the necropolitical aspect in the contemporary political and economic system in their analysis.

The concept of biopolitics has to be examined first in order to discuss the illusion of democracy in modern capitalist societies. According to Michel Foucault (1976: 139–143), modern political power rests on the idea of administering life. Political power is concerned with the management of the lives of the population. Different aspects of the lives of the population (e.g. health, births, mortality, life expectancy, illness, sexuality) is supervised and modified by power. This form of power requires constant surveillance and regulation over the bodies of the population. Foucault argued that this new form of power was fundamental to create healthy productive bodies for the capitalist system.

For Foucault, what is regarded as normal is actually produced and conditioned by power. He states, “a normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life” (Foucault 1976: 144). The effects of power are internalized by the subjects of this power (Foucault 1976, 1991). According to Foucault, biopolitics represented a new form of liberal governance which made life an object of measurement, calculation, evaluation, and management by the scientific experts (Lemke 2010: 429–431). Here, biopolitics is fundamental to the functioning of the modern political and

economic regime. Its purpose is to ensure that the human life is always under surveillance and control.

Another vital form of control exercised by liberalism is governmentality. For Foucault, freedom in liberalism is not just an ideology; freedom in liberalism functions as a technique and means of governance to realize certain goals (Dean 2010: 23–24). Governmentality is comprised of a set of procedures, apparatuses and strategies, and its main focus is the population, “its principal form of knowledge is political economy, and its essential technical means apparatuses is security (Foucault 2001: 219–220). Governmentality describes a process in which the middle age’s state of justice is replaced by an administrative state (Foucault 2001: 220). The process of governmentality can be summarized in the phrase of “the conduct of conduct” (Li 2007: 275). This complex process aims to regulate, administer and arrange the desires, values and habitual conduct of the overall population (Li 2007: 275–276). Freedom in liberalism and neoliberalism does not reflect autonomy; on the contrary, it is a mere instrument created by liberal governmentality to produce docile and governable subjectivities (Lorenzini 2018: 7). If the conduct and desires of the people are already arranged, then the illusion of liberty is maintained. This is essential to the capitalist liberal regime which is supposedly democratic.

It is also important to mention that biopower and governmentality are not the only forms of control exercised by power described by Foucault. Individual bodies are disciplined through various disciplinary technologies (e.g. punishments, rewards, surveillance) in different societal institutions to ensure the total docility of the subjects (Foucault 1991). Those forms of power coexist together. Biopolitics and governmentality targets the whole population. While the target of disciplinary power is individual bodies. However, this essay is more concerned with the notions of biopolitics and governmentality because they target life; nonetheless, it is also important to consider that even individual bodies are being disciplined daily by various institutions.

There is another aspect which is fundamental to the contemporary sovereign liberal regime. According to Agamben (1998), the human life is the primary focus of the biopolitical governance of sovereignty. In the present situation the demarcation between the *zoe* (the mere biological existence) and *bios* (the quality of political life) is rendered obsolete. Sovereignty has the ability to decide the bare life. A life which is stripped from any rights and constantly threatened to be subjected to violence. Although the bare life is excluded from the regular law; nonetheless, by the way of its exclusion, it remains included within the dominant political realm. The camp which its inhabitants are transformed into a bare life, subjected to the sovereign violence, and deprived from any political rights is the “the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen” (Agamben 1998: 171). In modern western regimes the demarcation between the *bios* and *zoe* becomes obsolete “the body is always already a biopolitical life and a bare life” (Agamben

1998: 187). Agamben also noticed that the developmental policies of the democratic capitalist regimes are turning the poor classes in third world populations into a bare life (Agamben 1998: 180). Here Agamben exemplified the cruel and violent aspects of the contemporary form of liberal governance.

Thus, the biopolitical preservation of life is not the only task of the dominant Western political and economic paradigm. Mbembe (2003) took this argument a step forward to argue that Western sovereignty does not only decides who lives, but the power of sovereignty manifests itself in dictating who must die. Sovereignty deploys its powers to kill who must die and subjugate certain groups and populations to cruel and violent conditions which lead to death. This notion is called necropolitics. Necropower is usually directed against marginalized groups such as racial minorities, women and queer people (Smith 2016; Wright 2011; Velasco 2020). Hence, not only life is regulated, but also death is managed by power.

It becomes questionable what is left in this regime to recognize it as democratic. The demos in contemporary bourgeois democracies are powerless in front of the immense power of capital and the state (Brown 2011: 46–47). As numerous studies exemplify, complex notions of power such as governmentality, biopolitics and necropolitics are fundamental to the functioning of the contemporary neoliberal order whether through liberal states, non-state organizations and global economic institutions (Moisander, Groß and Eräranta 2017; Haskaj 2018; Joseph 2010; Gournari 2016). Those forms of power permeate every governing institutions whether on a local level or a global level. They can be economic or political. They all work together to ensure the complete monitoring and arrangement of the populations.

In the capitalist society, the predominate logic of organization is administration. Adorno and Horkheimer observed that under capitalism, people's lives became fully administered; they termed this condition as the "totally administered world" (Cook 1998: 18). According to Adorno and Bernstein (2001: 107–123) the modern form of culture is characterized by the dominance of total administration. Spontaneity and autonomy are diminished in favor of an administrative planning from above. Adorno and Bernstein write "spontaneity diminishes because total planning takes precedence over the individual impulses, predetermining this impulse in turn, reducing it to the level of illusion, and no longer tolerating that play of forces which was expecting to give rise to a free totality" (Adorno and Bernstein 2001: 123). Adorno diagnosed the form of life in the capitalist society as damaged because of the prevalence of commodification and domination over life which eradicated spontaneity and difference (Morgan 2014: 120). Individuals are conformed to this administrated world and every aspect of life becomes predetermined by an overwhelming force.

After synthesizing the previously mentioned theoretical contributions regarding life under capitalism and sovereignty a different picture becomes apparent underneath the facade of democracy. The human life is administered and managed by several

apparatuses and institutions. The human life, from its primal biological elements to the social behavior of the individual, is constantly modified and produced by a complex network of power. Moreover, this form of administration expands its grip on the subjects to reach death. Thus, making the entire human existence under the contemporary liberal regime a mere product of power. The individuals are grouped into populations and subjugated to either control and modification over life or monstrous violence leading to death. The cycle of life and death is not determined by individual autonomy, but it is predetermined by an overwhelming force to sustain the dominate structures of economic and political dominance. The entire existence of human beings renders heteronomous. All levels of autonomy are belittled by the predominate apparatus.

Furthermore, there is a greater danger to this form of governance veiled under the disguise of freedom. Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the horrific violence of Nazism and fascism was a product of the European modernity's instrumental rationality which transformed humans into tools or objects of domination. They stated that the terror inflicted upon the Jews in the camps was planned and administered in a reified bureaucratic matter (Malloy 2004: 44–46). As Agamben (1998: 10) already noticed, that there is an "inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism". The Nazi camp represented the ultimate paradigm and manifestation of the state of exception which suspends the law and transforms life into bare life which is regularly exercised by Western democratic regimes (Agamben 1998: 168–180). The biopolitical and necropolitical technologies employed by Nazism already existed in European socio-political formation, but the Nazis only amplified those mechanisms of power (Mbembe 2003: 23). Thus, there is persistent danger lurking underneath all of those mechanisms of power. Liberal democracies manifest a lack of genuine freedom and the annihilation of human autonomy; however, they can become more monstrous when the administrative logic of power realizes its full potential. This happens when the technologies of power and administration reach the end of their trajectory. They unfold into fascism which is their ultimate and purest manifestation.

3. Engaging the messianic with the democratic

Since the whole human existence under capitalism and sovereignty is under the total administration of complex technologies of power. Even death is planned and administered. The conditions of death are being intensified to dispose of the people who must die and the people who live are being managed daily. This cycle of life and death is already fully administered. Thus, any attempt to modify it using its own logic is futile. This form of damaged administrative life creates a deadlock. At the first glance it may appear as inescapable. To understand how this state of existence can be escaped, a return to Adorno and Agamben is necessary in conjunction with Walter Benjamin.

Benjamin was a fierce critic of the notion of progress. For Benjamin (2007: 254) there is a weak messianic energy that ties past generations with the present generation through redemption. Benjamin uses Klee's painting as a parable. The angel is being propelled forward by the immense force of the storm of progress while the angel is looking back gazing at the catastrophes of the past; the angel is incapable of stopping (Benjamin 2007: 257–258). Progress which runs through the empty homogeneous time had been made to seem inevitable and inescapable (Benjamin 2007: 260–261). The revolutionary or messianic moment creates a blast in the continuum progression of history and constructs a new calendar which transforms the empty homogeneous time into a saturated messianic time (Benjamin 2007: 261–263). Benjamin opposed the conception which regarded the flow of history in a linear and mechanical time and advocated a non-linear condensed time (Khatib 2013: 3). Benjamin (2003: 402) wrote "Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake". The revolutionary goal for Benjamin here is not to push the flow of history forward. On the contrary, the revolutionary action should redeem the oppressed past and disrupt the historical storm of progress. Employing the messianic power to halt the homogeneous temporal flow of history.

It is also fundamental to examine Adorno's ethics to reach an alternative democratic model. Adorno (2005: 39) famously declared that "wrong life cannot be lived rightly". For Adorno the institutions of modern society are rationalized to serve the process of capitalist reproduction, thus they are insufficient to act as spaces for an ethical life, so he found refuge in the sphere of private existence (Bernstein 2005: 41). However, Adorno was well aware that this private sphere is not autonomous from the structures domination and it is indeed distorted by the processes of capital and administration (Adorno and Bernstein 2001: 194; Bernstein 2005: 42). Nonetheless, Adorno was not a complete pessimist. Adorno's notion of potentiality indicates that a right emancipated life is indeed a real possibility but it has been blocked by a group of social structures and mechanisms (Macdonald 2019: 6–7).

Moreover, according to another interpretation, Adorno believed that although the wrong life cannot be lived rightly; however, it can be lived "more or less wrongly" (Freyenhagen 2013: 65). Thus, a potential for a different life is indeed a real possibility. Adorno (2005: 39) stated that "The best mode of conduct, in face of all this, still seems an uncommitted, suspended one: to lead a private life, as far as the social order and one's own needs will tolerate nothing else, but not to attach weight to it as to something still socially substantial and individually appropriate". It seems that Adorno's approach to living a "right life" is the disassociation from the administrative world that serves the needs of capitalist accumulation and reproduction. However, not any private life is an autonomous life because as stated earlier the administrative process targets all aspect of the private life (e.g. health, desires, sexuality, behavior, daily life, love). But, Adorno

specified a particular form of a private life which is “suspended” to live less wrongly. This article will not restrict the notion of suspension to the private sphere only; however, the Adornian stress on suspension is crucial to this analysis.

It is also vital to mention Adorno’s stress on messianism and redemption in the face of despair. At the end of *minima moralia*, he eloquently stated that “The only philosophy that can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, that reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the Messianic light.” (Adorno 2005: 247) As it will be exemplified more later, messianism and suspension are inherently interlocked with each other.

To further develop the concept of suspension, an examination of Agamben’s thought on messianism is fundamental. There is a central motif in the philosophy of Agamben which endorses the idea of a possible different form of life (Prozorov 2011: 81). For Agamben, the messianic vocation is essentially about deactivating the juridical-factual circumstances; but, it does not generate a new identity (Cimino 2016: 108). There are similarities between the biopolitical state of exception and this messianic state of exception; however, there are fundamental differences. The predominant state of exception suspends the law (but to target the bare life) and the messianic experience also deactivates the law (Agamben 1998; Agamben 2005a; Cimino 2016).

However, the messianic suspends the law for radically different ends and through different means. The messianic form of life cannot be institutionalized, and it does not destroy the predominate order of things, nor it brings a new order (Cimino 2016: 112). The messianic life rests on the principle of use not possession (Agamben 2005b: 26). He uses the phrase “free use of the common” (Agamben 2000: 118). For Agamben the primary objective of the messianic is to render law ineffective and inoperative through a process of deactivation (Agamben 2005b: 97). “The messianic is not the destruction but the deactivation of law, rendering the law inexecutable” (Agamben 2005b: 98). The revolutionary potential of the messianic life lies precisely in its aim to deactivate and suspend the sovereign order; not abolishing it (Cimino 2016: 112). It filters the prevalent order through *Hos Me (as not)* (Cimino 2016: 112).

According to many of Agamben’s interpreters, inoperativity entails the rejection of being an operative part of the machinery of the state (De la Durantaye 2009: 18). This notion of deactivation, to a certain extent, echos Walter Benjamin’s idea of the “real state of emergency” of the oppressed (Benjamin 2007: 257). To understand Agamben’s messianic politics more clearly, it is fundamental to examine Agamben’s interpretation of Herman Melville’s story *Bartleby the scrivener*. Bartleby’s famous statement “I prefer not to” is a pure example on making rules inoperative (Balskus 2010: 167). He neither affirms

nor denies the order; but he nonetheless removed himself from the structures of power through this act (Balskus 2010: 167). Potentiality for Agamben entails two vital sides “the potential to be” and “the potential to not be”; both sides are equally important for a true potentiality (De la Durantaye 2009: 20). Bartleby for Agamben represents a messianic figure (Balskus 2010: 172). Here, Bartleby chose the potentiality “to not be”. Instead of demanding political changes, he chose not to take part in the contemporary form of sovereign order (Balskus 2010: 178). Thus, for Agamben the messianic form of life primarily relies on a process of deactivation and suspension.

After this theoretical overview, a general notion for a different form of democracy can be discussed based on the insights of Agamben, Adorno and Benjamin. There is no hope in engaging with the predominate apparatuses as Adorno noticed, however, this observation should not lead to a condition of despair. The solution of this paradox lies in engaging with a different form of life. This revolutionary form of life is detached from the structures and power through a process of suspension. The form of life is messianic because redemption of the past is at its center. The administrative structures flow in the empty homogeneous time of history. This messianic form of life comes to interrupt the homogeneous time of history. It brings history and the progress of the administrative biopolitical and necropolitical apparatus into a standstill at this point of time. This messianic form of life goes even beyond that to constitute a state of being. It interrupts the status-quo, suspends its laws and suspends itself from the existing power structures simultaneously. By performing this messianic gesture, this state of being renders the impact of sovereignty and capital obsolete, in the sense that they become suspended and inoperative within this particular temporal-spatial state of being which exists in the messianic condition. The laws of possession of capital and the laws of sovereign politics become ineffective. This messianic form embraces Bartleby's motto “I prefer not to”. The cycle of life which revolves around the biopolitical control over life and the necropolitical control over death is halted in this particular moment of the messianic time. The laws of administration lose their meaning because in the messianic life, those laws are suspended within this particular form of this revolutionary living/state of existence. Law loses its ability to be effective because this messianic form of being chooses not to. Although the predominate rules and regulations over life and death are not abolished, however, the messianic form of being creates a more cataclysmic effect which is rendering it useless and inoperative. In this form of life, a genuine democracy can emerge which is the messianic life. Democracy here is a messianic state of being which invokes and revitalizes the human autonomy once more. It is a radically difference existence in the literal sense.

4. Conclusion

After a careful analysis, building on the thought of Foucault, Agamben, Mbembe and Adorno, it becomes apparent that the liberal democratic regime is essentially a form of

subjugation. A mode of governance its aim is to produce a repetitive cycle of life and death. Liberal democracy constrained the individuals in a vicious administrative cycle of life and death. In this form of governance, the lives of the populations are regulated and modified by biopolitics. The bodies of the population are metamorphosed into a bare life and subjected to violence and brutal conditions of death. The people who must live are constantly conditioned and managed. On the other hand, the people who must die are being subjugated to conditions that eventually lead to death. In this regime, individuals are stripped of their autonomy. They become heteronomous to a monstrous condition of relentless administration. This administrative apparatus diminished spontaneity. It destroyed individuality. Instead, it constructed a cycle of life and death heteronomous to the predominate powers. Individuals and populations are the subjects of this administrative apparatus which is concealed by a democratic facade. Furthermore, this order is constantly susceptible to the amplification of its mechanisms and technologies of administration. This intensification of the administrative technologies is the formula for the progression towards fascism. This danger is ingrained in the capitalist-sovereign formation. Genuine democratic life is not possible in a fully administered existence.

Despite the overwhelming dominance of this regime, Adorno's, Agamben's and Benjamin's insights offer a glimpse of hope for a different form of a messianic life. This is through the notions of interruption, suspension, indifference and inoperativity. Based on their theoretical contributions, a new radical form of messianic life can be formulated. This state of being renders the predominate powers and laws inoperative. The messianic life is fundamentally a totally suspended life. A suspended state of being which suspends the logic of capital and sovereignty. The messianic politics is a blast in the progress of the biopolitical/necropolitical administrative machinery. The messianic interrupts the continuum of power. The messianic politics deactivates this structure making it ineffective, inoperative and meaningless. The messianic life emerges and perpetuates its state of being by utilizing the means of interruption, indifference and suspension. This form of life explores the potentialities of to be or not to be. This form of democratic life is the antithesis of domination and administration. The suspended messianic life and the democratic life are synonymous. Although this messianic life to an extent is a form of negation of the capitalist-sovereign order; nonetheless, it does not indicate passivity in the traditional sense. On the contrary, its purpose is to solidify and affirm autonomy. It vitalizes the spontaneity of the human life. The spontaneous impulses which are hindered by the administrative power over life and death by the predominant structures of domination. The messianic life suspends the administrative structures and renders them ineffective to open new temporal-spatial spheres for a genuine democratic life/existence.

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