

Bare Life: Political Order and the Specter of Antisocial Being in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"Bare Life":
Political Order and the Specter of Antisocial Being in
Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

Daniel Juan Gil (bio)

Many early modern writers, including Shakespeare, celebrated the state's growing penetration of daily life.¹ On the other hand, because the social imaginary founded on the nation-state was still emergent in the period, early modern writers, again including Shakespeare, could also conceive of alternatives. In that sense, the surviving literary culture of the period is a resource for rethinking some of our most basic modern assumptions about social and political life. My aim in these pages is to disclose an oppositional discourse that declines to assume the nation-state as a basic framework for society. Exploiting the turmoil generated by the state's effort to penetrate and organize social life, this oppositional discourse reimagined the most basic, body-mediated interactions through which people connect to other people outside of political or even social structures. Crucial to this project, however, is to distinguish this early modern approach from our present notions of civil society. In the sense in which the term has become influential in communitarian and antipolitical discourse, "civil society" is imagined **[End Page 67]** to rely on connections between people that operate outside the sphere of state power.² Contemporary accounts often draw on Jürgen Habermas's now classic study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Focusing on eighteenth-century England, Habermas describes a public sphere founded on an extra-state society that nurtures a "purely human" use of communicative rationality.³ So conceived, civil society is potentially universal and, transcending the framework of the nation-state, can subject it to reasoned critique from outside.⁴

Several theorists of state power, notably Giorgio Agamben, have offered a structural critique of these conclusions. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben argues that all political power is "biopolitical" in that it seeks to organize the most basic, biological infrastructure of human life. Thus, Agamben suggests, civil society is not an autonomous social development but a product of state power:⁵

It is almost as if, starting from a certain point, every decisive

political event were double-sided: the spaces, the liberties, and the rights won by individuals in their conflicts with central powers always simultaneously prepared a tacit but increasing inscription of individuals' lives within the state order, thus offering a new and more dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves. . . . The fact is that one and the same affirmation of bare life leads, in bourgeois democracy, to a primacy of the private over the public and of individual liberties over collective obligations and yet **[End Page 68]** becomes, in totalitarian states, the decisive political criterion and the exemplary realm of sovereign decisions.⁶

The paradox that Agamben points to is that the private realm liberates itself from the state only by demanding from the state a charter of rights and privileges that involves private life ever more fully in the political order. In effect, Agamben is opposed to any liberal theory that posits a social life that preexists state power and that offers a standpoint from which state power can be criticized from outside. Civil society tacitly affirms state power, he argues, even if it also allows for critical detachment from particular state policies.

The early modern state's effort to organize the details of social life is a central concern of early modern culture. Writers of the period would, typically, have agreed that what we now call "private life" and "civil society" were recent products of the state and its penetration of social life. But Agamben's account of state power as *essentially* biopolitical, as *always* seeking to rationalize and structure the amorphous realm of "bare life," is especially instructive to the student of antipolitics. Bypassing the dyad of nation-state and state-mediated civil society, the early modern discourse of antipolitics seeks to make "bare life" visible as such. To imagine a form of life not mediated by political structures, early modern writers in this line turned their attention to emotions, which they interpreted neither as privileged signs of an inner self nor as merely bodily...

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The author would like to thank Julia Reinhard Lupton, Graham Hammill, Christopher Pye, Jeffrey Perl, and Leonard Feldman for their comments on drafts of this essay.

1. New Historicist critics have made this case well, notably, Jonathan Goldberg in *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and their Contemporaries* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

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London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010. Cased, £25. ISBN: 978-0-297, dialogicality, having
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Julius Caesar's Bellum Civile and the Composition of a New Reality, interpretation of all the
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