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No to Bio-Political Tattooing

Giorgio Agamben

2004

The newspapers leave no doubt: from now on whoever wants to go to the United States with a visa will be put on file and will have to leave their fingerprints when they enter the country. Personally, I have no intention of submitting myself to such procedures and that's why I didn't wait to cancel the course I was supposed to teach at New York University in March.

I would like to explain the reasons for this refusal here, that is, why, in spite of the sympathy that has connected me to my American colleagues and their students for many years, I consider that this decision is at once necessary and without appeal and would hope that it will be shared by other European intellectuals and teachers.

It's not only the immediate superficial reaction to a procedure that has long been imposed on criminals and political defendants. If it were only that, we would certainly be morally able to share, in solidarity, the humiliating conditions to which so many human beings are subjected.

The essential does not lie there. The problem exceeds the limits of personal sensitivity and simply concerns the juridical-political

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status (it would be simpler, perhaps, to say bio-political) of citizens of the so-called democratic states where we live.

There has been an attempt the last few years to convince us to accept as the humane and normal dimensions of our existence, practices of control that had always been properly considered inhumane and exceptional.

Thus, no one is unaware that the control exercised by the state through the usage of electronic devices, such as credit cards or cell phones, has reached previously unimaginable levels.

All the same, it wouldn't be possible to cross certain thresholds in the control and manipulation of bodies without entering a new bio-political era, without going one step further in what Michel Foucault called the progressive animalisation of man which is established through the most sophisticated techniques.

Electronic filing of finger and retina prints, subcutaneous tattooing, as well as other practices of the same type, are elements that contribute towards defining this threshold. The security reasons that are invoked to justify these measures should not impress us: they have nothing to do with it. History teaches us how practices first reserved for foreigners find themselves applied later to the rest of the citizenry.

What is at stake here is nothing less than the new "normal" bio-political relationship between citizens and the state. This relation no longer has anything to do with free and active participation in the public sphere, but concerns the enrollment and the filing away of the most private and incommunicable aspect of subjectivity: I mean the body's biological life.

These technological devices that register and identify naked life correspond to the media devices that control and manipulate public speech: between these two extremes of a body without words and words without a body, the space we once upon a time called politics is ever more scaled-down and tiny.

Thus, by applying these techniques and these devices invented for the dangerous classes to a citizen, or rather to a human being as

such, states, which should constitute the precise space of political life, have made the person the ideal suspect, to the point that it's humanity itself that has become the dangerous class.

Some years ago, I had written that the West's political paradigm was no longer the city state, but the concentration camp, and that we had passed from Athens to Auschwitz. It was obviously a philosophical thesis, and not historic recital, because one could not confuse phenomena that it is proper, on the contrary, to distinguish.

I would have liked to suggest that tattooing at Auschwitz undoubtedly seemed the most normal and economic way to regulate the enrolment and registration of deported persons into concentration camps. The bio-political tattooing the United States imposes now to enter its territory could well be the precursor to what we will be asked to accept later as the normal identity registration of a good citizen in the state's gears and mechanisms. That's why we must oppose it.