Agamben, Postcoloniality, and Sovereignty in South Korea

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Abstract: This paper examines modern Korean politics through the framework of Giorgio Agamben’s theories of sovereign power, bare life, and the state of exception. Though his political analysis draws from the European history, we contend that the nature of his method attests to the possibility of analogical examples in non-Western places. Thus, we argue that a postcolonial encounter with Agamben may enrich our understanding of sovereignty and political geography. In the Korean context, such an analysis needs to consider that sovereign power has been shaped by the itineraries of colonialism and empire. Korea’s political space is deeply marked by the legacy of Japanese colonialism, the imperial interventions by the U.S., and the division of the peninsula. Thus, Korea offers a valuable lens through which to read Agamben’s critique of sovereignty. Our paper offers such a reading to argue that a state of exception functions as the underlying nomos for postcolonial Korea.

Keywords: Agamben, South Korea, sovereign power, homo sacer, state of exception, political ontology

Introduction
Massive protests shook South Korea through the summer of 2008. Hundreds of thousands of people marched through the cities holding candles, chanting, and singing. The legality of these demonstrations was challenged by the state, which eventually succeeded in putting them down. Yet the masses felt that their demonstrations were justified by Article One of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea (enacted 17 July 1948):

1. The Republic of Korea shall be a democratic republic.
2. The sovereignty of the Republic of Korea shall reside in the people, and all state authority shall emanate from the people.

The demonstrators defended the legitimacy of their protests by appealing to this founding text of South Korea’s state, which embodies the concept of popular sovereignty. Its words were set to music in a song entitled “Article One in the
Constitution”. This song, arranged by well-known songwriter and activist Min-Suk Yoon, served as the popular anthem of the 2008 protests and was sung daily by thousands. Its catchy pop refrain resounded through the streets for weeks, an iterative performative assertion that sovereignty resides with the people. The simplicity of this equation met its musical expression in a four-chord, major-key rock song. Likewise the affirmativeness of its central assertion (the inherently popular-democratic character of the Republic) was sounded through its upbeat rhythm and joyous tone. The repetitive and collective singing seemed to assert that the people are themselves sovereign, that this condition is to be affirmed by singing together in public—and that the act of collectively singing the Constitution materializes the right to demonstrate. Thus, the mass singing of “Article One of the Constitution” was a performative enactment, an embodied demonstration of popular sovereignty (Butler 1993; also Lee 2008). Many protesters in the USA are familiar with the now-common protest chant, “this is what democracy looks like”. The effect of the collective singing of “Article One” was similar, yet more substantial, since the song’s lyrics are composed of the very words that constitute the sovereignty of the Korean state.

Many Korean participants interpreted the protests as the actualization of the abstract notion of popular sovereignty (eg Chikang and Chun 2009; Lee 2008). While sympathetic to this view, we do not share it entirely. For one thing, the concrete results of the demonstrations fell far short of most participants’ wishes, and the Lee regime remained in power. State violence was perpetrated against numerous protesters. Moreover, shortly after these protests, five demonstrators against redevelopment projects in Yongsan (a neighborhood in central Seoul) were killed. In subsequent debates over the meaning of these deaths, some conservatives suggested that their deaths were unproblematic because the dead were merely “Jwabbal” (Woo 2009). Jwabbal is a compound word comprised of two signs 조병(I, meaning Jwa (left) and bbal, short for bbalgengi: literally a red person. “Jwabbal” therefore means a person defined by their support of communism. The implication is that a Jwabbal is a North Korean sympathizer—therefore an enemy of the state.

The state’s killing of protestors and the public legitimations of their murder vividly reveal the capacity of the state’s power to create legally and politically excluded lives. Such a capacity seems to contradict the protesters’ assertion of the people’s sovereign power. This paradoxical situation evokes a passage from Giorgio Agamben’s landmark study of sovereign power, Homo Sacer (1998: 121):

> It is almost as if ... every decisive political event [is] 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.

These lines bear great significance for Korea. Since the 1960s, the concept of people’s sovereign power has legitimized resistance to the military dictatorship as well as foreign (particularly US) intervention (Cooley 2005). Yet the ongoing violence and repression in South Korea suggests that the realization of this abstract concept—the nation/people-as-sovereign—has not succeeded in
transforming fundamental political relations. Therefore we ask: does this essentially biopolitical transformation—the emergence of a Republic and popular sovereignty since the 1980s—contain the force needed to reconstitute the violence of the political?

Our paper examines this question by analyzing the modalities of sovereign power in contemporary South Korea. We draw principally upon Agamben, whose innovative insights enable a fundamental critique of sovereign power as a fiction essential to modern biopolitics. His theory demands that we reexamine the widespread belief that people’s sovereignty is pre-given, natural, and good. Agamben’s novel approach to sovereignty and biopolitics has generated considerable interest outside of Korea (Hussain and Ptacek 2000; Laclau 2007; Mesnard 2004; Passavant 2007; Žižek 2002) as well as among many human geographers (Barkan 2009; Belcher et al. 2008; Fluri 2012; Giaccaria and Minca 2011; Gregory 2006; Jan 2010; Minca 2006, 2007; Pratt 2005; Schinkel and van den Berg 2011; Springer 2013; Wainwright 2010). While some Korean scholars have introduced Agamben’s theories to Korean readers (Yang 2008; Yoo and Hong 2007), their works have only reviewed Agamben’s concepts and have not examined the contemporary implications of his thought for Korea. This is our aim.

At first blush, Agamben’s deployment of political categories (sovereignty, the exception, and the camp) seems rooted in the history of Western thought. Some theorists have therefore remained wary of applying Agamben’s insights, drawn from the West, to an analysis of politics elsewhere. We suggest a twofold conceptual strategy to overcome what otherwise might lend itself to theoretical imperialism and a Eurocentric political geography. On the one hand, we aim to produce an engagement between Agamben and postcolonial theory, with its sustained critique of the lingering effects of colonialism on political and intellectual life (Chatterjee 1986; Gidwani 2008; Spivak 1988; Said 1994 [1978]; Wainwright 2008). Given the broader aims of our paper, of course, this engagement will of necessity be limited. On the other hand, we seek to highlight what Agamben (2007b:np) himself has been at pains to elaborate: that his investigations into European politics and history are only the “shadow of his theoretical questioning of the present”. Theorists wishing to “deploy” Agamben should be attentive to the essentially paradigmatic nature of figures like homo sacer and the state of exception. Agamben himself makes this clear. Displacing the location of a paradigm from the opposition between the particular and the universal,4 he argues that a paradigm implies a movement from singularity to singularity, a movement which may be translated into an exemplar but without losing its own contextual specificity (Agamben 2009:22–23). In this sense, it makes little sense to speak of applying Agamben’s ideas to cases. Agamben warns against treating his ideas in this fashion. For us, reading Korean politics with Agamben requires moving from singularity to singularity. Agamben’s method—a “paradigmatic ontology” (2009:32)5—necessitates understanding his project as an essentially ontological disclosure of the political, an understanding that helps us to confront Eurocentrism. With these points in mind, we are prepared to cross boundaries with Agamben—while simultaneously recognizing that the very distinction between “West” and “non-West” is neither clear nor firm.

Consider Korea, usually seen as “non-West”. The conception of sovereignty in Korea, as well as the practices through which sovereignty is contested and
refashioned, is impossible to grasp apart from its complex history of interventions by foreign powers. The unfinished historical assessment of pro-Japanese elites in the period of Japanese colonial rule, the partition of the territory by the US with Soviet acquiescence, the stationing of US armies for more than half a century, and so on, remind us that colonial legacies persist in the fabric of Korean state and society. Consider that the language of Article One of the Constitution was drawn up during a period of US rule: even the terms of opposition to sovereign power have been shaped in the crucible of empire. Yet the meaning of “sovereignty” in Korea is not reducible to some kind of epistemic dominance of colonial powers. Hence the particularities of the logic of sovereign power and the forms of its opposition in Korea cannot be understood outside of the legacies of colonialism—but neither can they be reduced generically to instances of Western colonialism or “Orientalism” (Said 1994 [1978]).

To elaborate this argument, we examine three vectors of sovereign power in Korea. We begin with the very division of the peninsula, reading this territorial caesura as a quintessentially ontological and geographical event or “worlding”, one which enables a permanent state of exception. We then discuss the birth of the “bbalgengi”, a subject specific to the South Korean political imagination, and conclude by considering the decisive 1980 crisis in Gwangju (often seen as initiating the era of democratic politics). Through this tripartite analysis, we question the valorization of people’s sovereignty which defines “progressive” Korean politics. We further argue that the spatial structure of modern Korea—the divided peninsula—has created conditions favorable to the violent operation of sovereign power, a permanent state of exception, and the camp. Thus are sovereignty and geography co-implicated in Korea.

**Postcoloniality and Agamben’s Ontological Critique of Sovereignty**

The structure of exception ... appears ... to be consubstantial with Western politics (Agamben 1998:7).

Once the thrill of the encounter with Agamben’s spatially resonant, innovative analysis has subsided, his work must be properly situated within the terrain of political ontology. While a full consideration of the significance and implications of placing the ontological problem—the question of being—at the heart of any socio-political analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, there is little doubt that Agamben’s entire path of thinking is anything other than a critical ontology. Indeed the urgent correlation between ontology and politics is so central to the *Homo Sacer* project that Agamben repeatedly reads politics in terms of “the fundamental structure of Western metaphysics” (Agamben 1998:8, 48, 59, 182, 188). The topological elements of his work—the state/space of exception, threshold, the camp—are unintelligible without an ontological bearing. This should not be understood simply as displacing politics with the arcane concerns of first philosophy. On the contrary, Agamben’s political ontology, which we can define briefly as a concern for the political implications of the oblivion of being, aims to disclose the ways in
which a metaphysical comportment towards material life is always already in play, constituting something like a political a priori. And it is precisely the unthought and empty metaphysical presuppositions embedded within the political that come back to haunt our contemporary moment in the guise of various apparatus. So it remains critical to recognize that his aim is neither strictly philosophical nor historical:

_Homo sacer_ and the concentration camp, the _Muselmann_ and the state of exception, and, more recently, the Trinitarian _oikonomia_ ... are not hypotheses through which I intended to explain modernity by tracing it back to something like a cause or historical origin. On the contrary, as their very multiplicity might have signaled, each time it was a matter of paradigms whose aim was to make intelligible series of phenomena whose kinship had eluded or could elude the historian’s gaze. To be sure, my investigations, like those of Foucault, have an archaeological character (Agamben 2009:31).

Hence it would be uncharitable to treat Agamben’s key figures—such as _homo sacer_ and the _Muselmann_—as merely political concepts for, or subjects of, European historiography. Agamben describes his archaeological work as a “paradigmatology”, or “paradigmatic ontology”, because “the intelligibility in question in the paradigm has an ontological character. It refers not to the cognitive relation between subject and object but to being” (2009:32). Thus as we suggest above, Agamben does not offer us universals, drawn from European history. Rather, through archaeological readings into modernity he seeks to disclose the signature or stamp of being. Since the signature is imminent in the paradigm, there is no question of tracing sovereignty back to a European origin or _arche_.

Without contextualizing Agamben’s argument within the domain of philosophical archaeology, one might infer a geographical ambiguity in Agamben’s critique of sovereignty. For instance, he describes the sovereign exception as “consubstantial with Western politics” (see epigram). This would have two apparent meanings. First, his genealogical investigation of Western political thought begins from the Greek’s divergent use of the concept of “life”, passes through ancient Rome and the medieval period, and culminates in a critique of the modern era as having crossed a certain threshold in the politicization of life, or biopolitics. Second, his critique undoubtedly centers on Western politics, or more specifically political practices and concepts from and in Europe. Yet it is also clear that Agamben does not see his critique as limited to the spaces we associate with “the West” since he treats the contemporary era as one where the sovereign exception and biopolitics are prevalent everywhere (Agamben 2000, 2005). For instance he writes, “the capitalistic-democratic plan to eliminate the poor not only reproduces inside itself the people of the excluded but also turns all the populations of the Third World into naked life” (2000:35). This implies that the pernicious effects of sovereign power and its exceptions (“consubstantial with Western politics”) have spread throughout the world—perhaps even defining it as the exemplary gesture of the modern world. Yet this is only implied.6

It would perhaps be fair to characterize Agamben’s diagnosis of modernity as unfolding almost entirely within the horizon of Heidegger’s concern with the abandonment of being: “If Being in this sense is nothing other than Being in the ban of the being ... then the ontological structure of sovereignty here fully reveals its paradox” (1998: 60, our italics). Agamben’s critique of sovereignty is thus clearly

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concerned in the first instance with its modality, its “ontological structure”. To put it in terms of Heidegger’s ontological difference, Agamben’s thought is not concerned with producing a universal ontic framework that can be applied to non-Western socio-historical formations. Rather his strategy is to disclose singularities. And as Heidegger (1999:83) insists in the Contributions the singularity—the truth of be-ing—is also the abandonment and withdrawal of being, which discloses itself most clearly in the “distress” of the violent political practices of modernity. Thus Agamben’s claim about the expansion of Western sovereignty to define the Third World and the globally “excluded”—which is, for us, a profound and important point—should not be seen as neglecting the distinctive, ontic, qualities of sovereign power in these diverse spaces.7

Nevertheless, some criticize Agamben for his blindness to the postcolonial. For example, Nair points out Agamben’s failure to address “whether colonial and imperial modalities of sovereignty matter in the way the exception is conceptualized and contextualized ... [or his] reluctance to engage colonial and imperial histories in theorizing the exception” (2011:390). Without attending to the ontological character of Agamben’s analysis, such criticism leads to a banal emphasis on the coerciveness of postcolonial states (relative to metropolitan ones). This distinction between metropolitan and postcolonial powers is also implied in Stepputat’s (2005:62–63) discussion of Peru and its “less liberal” practices. Both studies seem to share a common assumption that postcolonial societies have not yet properly fulfilled a Western, liberal order. We cannot say that a greater intensity of the state of exception or violence determines postcoloniality (eg a description of postcolonial homo sacer as “an enemy who is beyond the human” who suffers double exclusion by postcolonial state; Nair 2011:391).

Recently the merits of postcolonial scholarship were firmly rejected by Vivek Chibber’s (2013) visceral critique of Subaltern studies. We agree with Chibber that “there is no warrant for concluding that in order to theorize the constellation of power in postcolonial nations”, such as Korea, “we need to construct entirely new theoretical frameworks” (145) from the ones which we use to analyze Europe. Yet, pace Chibber, the point of postcolonial theory as we understand it is not to invent a new theory for each region, but rather to explain how ostensibly global universals—democracy, sovereignty, and so on—have come to be at all and examine their political purchase.8 Agamben’s work is valuable to this end.

Two key points emerge through a postcolonial engagement with Agamben (and, inter alia, a critique of these critics).9 First, the era of colonialism is not over because it is through colonialism—and resistance to colonialism—that the form and character of sovereign power has become organized and mobilized in popular discourse. Notwithstanding the multiple and complex drives behind colonialism, there can be no doubt that the struggles around colonialism in twentieth century Korea transformed sovereignty in ways that shape contemporary state/society relations. We stress that this does not mean that sovereignty is a unique invention of Western history, nor reducible to “westernization” (Gidwani 2008). Rather the point is that we cannot grasp the complexities of the meaning of “westernization” in a place like Korea without tracking the problem of sovereignty—a path for which Agamben is an invaluable guide. The world is caught up in a series of overlapping
relationships of force, all of which accelerate and intensify the threshold of a space of exception and the production of the conditions for bare life. The complex cartographies of power unfolding across the Third World and formerly colonized spaces retain distinctive qualities, while simultaneously participating in an interconnected global catastrophe—a catastrophe that Benjamin (1999: 473) identifies as “progress”.

Second, a postcolonial reading of Agamben offers an ontological questioning of the spacing of sovereignty (Jan 2010; Spivak 1988; Wainwright 2008). If the point of postcolonialism is to query the West/non-West distinction, then the key to the encounter with Giorgio Agamben is to consider how the “West” in his concept of sovereign power is consubstantial with the geographical constitution of the world.10 Our aim, therefore, is not simply to “apply” theory from the West (Agamben) to the non-West (Korea), but rather to ask how Agamben’s critique might allow us to continue the postcolonial project of rethinking the West/non-West distinction anew, with a focus on the spatial ontology of sovereignty, and hence on understanding the new configurations and modalities of power.

Agamben, Postcoloniality, and Korea
Peninsular Division and the Making-Permanent of the State of Exception

The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion) (Agamben 1998:181).

Agamben’s analysis of sovereign power draws on Schmitt’s (1985:5) definition of the sovereign as “he who decides on the state of exception” as well as a clarification of the originary structure of the exception that eluded Schmitt. For Agamben, the state of exception or the state of emergency is neither an abnormal situation nor an exclusive right of totalitarian states.11 Rather, he contends that the exception is intrinsic to the very logic of modern political sovereignty. Here, sovereign power occupies a dual position in relation to the law: on the one hand, it is inside the legal order because it decides the state of exception; on the other hand, because the state of exception implies the non-application of the existing legal order, sovereign power stands outside the legal order. The decision to suspend the normal operation of the law (a constitution), and declare an exception to the rule means that the sovereign must occupy a paradoxical place, standing outside the juridical order and, yet, ordering it. Sovereignty is thus not only the power of decision—the power of scission, of border-making—but it is itself a topos which marks the very condition of possibility of juridical rule and the very notion of authority. In this sense, the state of exception takes the form of a threshold, or a zone of indistinction (Agamben 2005:23). The suspension of the rule creates a state of exception and also constitutes the relation between the rule and its exception. That is to say, the rule creates itself as a rule only through its relation to the exception. The essential nature of the exception develops from a kind of exclusionary ban which is effectively a relation of abandonment. Life under a state of exception is not just excluded
outside the law but is in fact abandoned: “The originary relation of law to life is not application but Abandonment” (Agamben 1998:29; italics original). This secret tie uniting sovereign power and bare life is examined through his genealogical investigation of the historically recurring figure of homo sacer, the life that is caught in the sovereign ban, “a life that may be killed but not sacrificed”. Rather than reiterate this analysis, we wish to consider how it illuminates the Korean situation.

Consider this concise reprisal of Korea’s modern history: 36 years of colonial domination by Japan; neo-colonial influence from the US; the Korean War and the division of the Korean peninsula; military dictatorship; rapid economic growth under authoritarian regimes; and financial crisis in 1997 are the political-economic conditions that determine modern politics in Korea. Bruce Cumings summarizes:

[T]he United States occupied southern Korea in 1945, set up a three-year military government, moved into the Yongsan military base in Seoul that the Japanese built in 1894, and ensconced the commander—Gen. John R. Hodge—in the executive mansion of the Japanese governor-general ... Hodge and his staff ruled through the modern, penetrative state bureaucracy that the Japanese also built, and filled out the administration with civil affairs officers trained for military government in Japan (Cumings 2004:10–11).

In effect, in 1945 the US replaced the Japanese colonial government in the southern part of the Korean peninsula. The Korean War never formally ended, but has been maintained—as a quasi-permanent state of exception—via an unusual cease-fire. Though it is now more than 50 years after the Armistice Agreement in 1953, there is still no clear separation between war and peace. Commenting on Agamben, Žižek (2002:np) argues that this peculiar quality has been generalized in our time: “the distinction between a state of war and a state of peace ... [has been] effectively blurred”, creating “a state of peace [that can be] at the same time ... a state of emergency”. This effectively describes Korea’s political geography.

The primary mechanism sustaining a state of exception—as an enduring feature of the political, on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone—is the national-territorial division. The divisional structure is routinely mobilized to justify state sovereignty in South Korea; the very existence of North Korea justifies this permanence of a state of exception. Just as the Nazis made a state of exception permanent through the “Decree for the Protection of the People and the State” which suspended the Weimar Constitution for 12 years (Agamben 2005:2), various legal and institutional measures, especially the National Security Law, have maintained the state of emergency in Korea. Under this condition, any resistance—from the democracy movement against an authoritarian regime to labor or farm movements—could potentially help the enemy and must be opposed. This state of emergency, whether explicit or implicit, has been a key means of legitimizing sovereign violence.

While Korean politics can be characterized as a permanent state of emergency, this does not mean that the material unfolding of sovereign power always assumes a consistent form and content. Changing conditions such as those surrounding military collisions with North Korea have shaped the specific ways in which a state of exception has been mobilized by the state. During the 1960s and 1970s the state of exception took an ostentatious public form. A conspicuous feature of the military dictatorship of Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) was the conflation of politico-military
exigency (threats from North Korea) with the economic imperative of national eco-

номic development as mutually-reinforcing bases of state power (see Barkan


power must everywhere and continuously refer to and appeal to emergency “as

well as laboring secretly to produce it” provides an apt description of successive

Korean regimes.

Consider, for instance, the actions of President Park in 1972. Through a special

pronouncement he abolished the Constitution, dissolved the National Assembly,
banned political activity, and passed a new constitution (the “Yusin Constitution”) that assigned the right to declare emergency measures to the President. During his regime, Park subsequently announced Emergency Measures nine times. Under these emergencies, the distinction between law and violence vanished and the President decided everything. Park’s Yusin system could be interpreted as an attempt at “preserving ... emergency” in Agamben’s terms (2000:6).

The Yusin system has passed, but sovereign power has not. The Lee Myung-bak regime enhanced the domination of the executive power over the legislative and judiciary (Seong 2009). The occupation of the National Assembly by ultra-conservatives, politically motivated investigations by the prosecutors, and judicial decisions interrupted by the regime, embodies Agamben’s claim that “the provisional abolition of the distinction among legislative, executive, and judicial powers as one of the essential characteristics of the state of exception ... [can] become a lasting practice of government” (2005:7). The sovereign claims to manage crisis: economic crisis, security crisis, even moral crisis. The specific content of crisis does not matter. All create exception. What becomes of one who questions the crisis?

**BBalgengi, homo sacer**

The fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoe* and *bios* (Agamben 1998:181).

Agamben shows that the figure of *homo sacer* in ancient Rome has survived through Western history in various forms (werewolf, bandit, Guantánamo detainee), and concludes that bare life is the fundamental *figure* in modern western politics: “Sacred life—the life that is presupposed and abandoned by the law in the state of exception—is the mute carrier of sovereignty, the real *sovereign subject*” (2000:113, italics original). His reading of Hobbes uncovers this secret relation between sovereign power and bare life. Agamben claims that the source of sovereignty should be seen not as the subjects’ free waiving of their natural rights but as the sovereign’s procurement of people’s natural rights: “Sovereign violence is in truth founded not upon on a pact but on the *exclusive inclusion of bare life in the state*” (1998:107, our italics). He concludes that what is distinctive today is that life is completely exposed to the violence of sovereign power “in the most profane and banal ways” (114) and that therefore “we are all virtually *homines sacri*” (115, italics original). Let us consider this thesis in light of Korea.
After attacking the US Navy at Pearl Harbor, the Japanese imperial state accelerated the mobilization of colonized Korean subjects as various forms of human capital: laborers to work in factories and mines in the Japanese imperium; foot soldiers to fight in the Japanese imperial war; comfort women to be forced to work as sexual slaves in military brothels; and even living bodies to be used for human experimentation (Cumings 2005:175–180). The Japanese colonial project thus reduced the Korean people to “virtually homines sacri”. Yet independence from the Japanese did not interrupt the production of homo sacer. The subsequent restructuring of the colonial system into Cold War partitions enabled the fundamental activity of sovereign power to continue, albeit in new forms.

Agamben argues that bare life “becomes the earthly foundation of the state’s legitimacy and sovereignty” (1998:127). In Korea, the production of a national body is supplemented, if not premised, by the thanatopolitical face of biopolitical sovereignty [or in Mbembe (2003)’s terms, by the workings of necropower]. The existence of bare life stripped of every political right is essential to sustain an illegitimate political regime. The Park regime faced considerable resistance in the wake of its military coup. So it declared opposition to the regime as a threat to national security. Shin observes that “accusations of communist agitation have been used to justify government suppression of all pro-democratic movements in South Korea” (2002:362). All criticisms of the state were equated with pro-North Korean communism. This position took subjective form in the “bbalgengi”. For instance, eight dissidents were arrested for having conspired to form an insurrection on 8 April 1974. One day after they were sentenced by the Supreme Court, they were put to death. The International Lawyers Association called this a “judicial murder” and recorded the event as a “dark day in judicial history” (Korea Democracy Foundation 2007). Long-term prisoners charged for being pro-North Korea as well as mysterious deaths of labor union members, opposition party members, soldiers, numerous university students and intellectuals: all are found in a zone of indistinction between law and violence and become homo sacer.

We claim that the creation of bbalgengi is coterminous with the division of the peninsula, setting South against North. As he analyzes the formation of the Korean “nation” after the division, Kim (2008) contends that the nation-building project depended on the mode of exclusion/inclusion, and as a result, it was accompanied by the exclusion and repression of the bbalgengi. Anti-communism determined the essential status of the citizen. To exterminate bbalgengi was a national obligation; the argument for their eradication received unconditional social legitimacy (2008:126–127). Bbalgengi became effectively non-national, differentially included in the nation as sub-citizens. Kim explains:

The massacre of the National Security and Directive League (Kukmin Bodo Yeonmeng) reveals that because anti-communism works as the standard for “the nationhood”, people outside “the nation” can be easily reduced to the objects of violence and suppression in an emergency (Kim 2008:128).13

Agamben helps us appreciate the astuteness of Kim’s claim. As Agamben explains, apropos the Jew in Nazi Germany, the definitive quality of homo sacer lies in “the actualization of a mere ‘capacity to be killed’ inherent in the condition of the
Jew as such” (1998:114). The same capacity is innate in bbalgengi, who may be killed without “any” punishment. The stigma of bbalgengi means the complete deprivation of “any” social and political rights. The so-called “involvement system” [yeonjwaje] formed the basis of sustaining the anti-communist system (Seo 2007:41).

Anti-communism persists, long after the Japanese colonial era. By facilitating partition it has shaped politics in “postcolonial” Korea (Shin 2002). Anti-communism’s ideological force remains dominant in social and political discourse (Kim 2008:128) and functions as a truth that can decide life. And yet anti-communism lacks a substantial theoretical ground of its own; its sole raison d’être is opposition to “communism”, however defined. Its threshold is essentially un-fixed; its meaning is determined either though a subject’s self-confession or, more commonly, by the assignment of such subjectivity by others (eg “you have read Marx, therefore you must be a communist”).

While bbalgengi is used throughout Korea, it has also become localized in a relatively new term, “Jeonrado bbalgengi”, meaning that all those from the Jeonra province in southwestern Korea are bbalgengi (Park 2009). This designation emerged after the May 1980 uprising in Gwangju—the provincial capital of South Jeonra province and the most populous city in southwest Korea—that was branded by the Chun regime as “the revolt by bbalgengi” (Hwang 2003).

**Gwangju as Camp**

Today ... the camp ... is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West (Agamben 1998:181).

The permanent state of exception and generalization of homo sacer is realized in the camp which Agamben sees as not only concrete, ethically unimaginable spaces (the Nazi camps) but also the paradigmatic space of modern biopolitics. A state of exception as a temporary suspension of the rule is now changed into a permanent spatial arrangement through the formation of the camp (Agamben 2000:39) where everybody is constituted as bare life, deprived of every political and legal status, and subject to the mythic violence of sovereign power. Inside the camp, there is no distinction between law and violence, between life and death, between norm and exception. “The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (Agamben 1998:168–169; italics original). Because the camp is created when the nexus between three elements of modernity—nation (birth), state, and land (territory)—is broken and the state begins to take care of the nation’s biological life, the camp is understood as “the hidden matrix” and “the new biopolitical nomos of the planet” (Agamben 2000:37, 45). This opens a paradox between Agamben’s understanding of the camp as the spatialization of a biopolitical nomos and geographical attempts to pin down a definite space as the camp. In discussing Gwangju as camp, we cannot resolve this paradox. Nevertheless, we do think that the work of specifying the signature of the camp is meaningful for a better understanding of Korean politics. We therefore reconsider the Gwangju massacre-cum-uprising by asking how sovereign power operated in
a particular city. Our thesis is that Gwangju in May 1980 reflects an actualization of the state of exception.

Following the death of President Park, General Chun Doo-hwan took power after a military coup on 12 December 1979. The new military power proclaimed an “Emergency Martial Law” over the country on 17 May 1980 ostensibly to prevent a North Korean invasion. Yet its purpose was to suppress domestic resistance to the regime. Under this measure, all universities were closed by the military; the Seventh Airborne Corps was dispatched into the universities in Gwangju. On the morning of 18 May, a conflict erupted between soldiers and university students who wished to enter their school. The harsh repression by the soldiers enraged the citizens. Subsequent demonstrations were in turn violently suppressed, with over 2000 estimated fatalities on that day (Park 2002:250). One journalist on the scene wrote: “I feel the insufficiency of my power of expression ... I cannot find any proper word to describe the conduct [of the military]: ‘barbarous acts’, ‘violence’, and ‘indiscriminate attacks’ are too soft. The word that pops up in my head is ‘human hunt’” (Surprise 7 June 2003).

The brutal violence under martial law fomented more protests around the city, and by 20 May the number of the protesters amounted to over one hundred thousand (Park 2002). That evening the military began shooting indiscriminately. Consequently the protesters formed a civil army (Choi 2003:8). Confronting the unexpected counterattack, the army initially retreated; then on 22 May it cut off every local road, electricity, water, and daily necessities, and blocked the city. The people of Gwangju ran their city for five days, until the army invaded and destroyed the resistance with a massacre on 26 May.18

How can we grasp such an event? For its part, the Military Law Command interpreted Gwangju as a “riot ... controlled by espionage agents [from North Korea], impure elements” that could cause “catastrophe to the national destiny” (Donga Ilbo 22 May 1980). While the logic underlying this statement presupposes a clear distinction between pro-North Koreans and innocent citizens, there was no determined standard for this distinction in the execution of sovereign violence. Isolating the city and banning the press facilitated concealment of the state violence (Jung 1995). A space was created where “politics becomes biopolitics and homo sacer is virtually confused with the citizen” (Agamben 1998:171). The underlying rationality of the slaughter was that the people of Gwangju were bbalgengi, essentially the enemy, and thus could be legally killed. Agamben’s description of those who enter the camp is only too appropriate for Gwangju:

The people who entered the camp moved about in a zone of indistinction between the outside and the inside, the exception and the rule, the licit and the illicit, in which every juridical protection had disappeared ... Inasmuch as its inhabitants have been stripped of every political status and reduced completely to naked life, the camp is also the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been realized—a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation (Agamben 2000:40–41).

Rendering Gwangju as a camp, an exemplary place to destroy popular resistance and project its sovereign “right of death”, was thus a crucial mechanism for the
state/military to sustain legitimacy and power. At the same time, the Gwangju massacre has been connected to US interference in Korea, since the US military executed operational control of South Korean Forces in 1980. The legacy of US colonial hegemony cannot, in this event, be separated from the consolidation and play of local “sovereignties” and the intensification of the sovereign exception.

Conclusions: “Agamben Fatigue” and the Ontological Character of His Critique
Agamben’s innovative analysis has drawn numerous criticisms. To conclude, we address some that are especially pertinent to our paper. First and foremost, Agamben’s theory is criticized for its pessimism. Ernesto Laclau (2007) dismisses it as a species of “political nihilism” that closes all possibilities for resistance. Similarly, Antonio Negri criticizes Agamben for reducing biopolitical reality to a negative ontology where all hope is lost. In this view, Agamben is a romantic champion of heroic failure and “behind this heroism lies the chasm of the return to nothingness, to the destinal insignificance of being, to the marginality of refusal” (Negri 2007:124). Slavoj Žižek offers a similar (albeit more careful) reading of Agamben, arguing that Agamben’s view leads to a “negative” teleology, closing off every possibility for political subjectivity to emerge (Žižek 2006:222). At first blush Agamben’s analysis certainly tends towards a pessimistic intellectual assessment of the world’s condition. However, this does not mean we can dismiss the rigor of his critique, nor do we in fact agree with this judgment of pessimism, as above all Agamben’s work is dedicated to jamming the destructive apparatus of sovereignty. A political theory should not be rejected on the grounds that it lacks a specific alternative for resistance. To reject Agamben on these grounds is not only to ask too much of criticism, but also to forget that resistance may take on the very modality of the exception, and thereby remain captive to the problems that Agamben seeks to expose.

Second, Agamben’s analysis has been criticized as ahistorical and for treating sovereignty as a quasi-transcendental phenomenon. For instance, Wendy Brown (2008:260) writes that in “Agamben’s formalistic account ... sovereignty and homo sacer are as timeless and eternal as the Latin Mass”. This implies that Agamben treats the theological dimensions of sovereign power as transhistorical. Yet all his studies point in the opposite direction. Homo Sacer’s analysis relies on archaeological methods to trace changing modes of inclusive exclusion of bare life by sovereign power.

However they are judged, such criticisms have led to an apparent turn away from Agamben, and the great enthusiasm for his work among human geographers—so apparent only years ago—has palpably declined. Recently some human geographers have stated reservations about engaging with Agamben, while complaining of the difficulties his ideas present. For instance, John Agnew (2009) criticizes Agamben’s argument for failing to distinguish between fascist and liberal-democratic statehood and thus offering a weak theoretical base for a progressive politics. He blames Agamben for “simply flipping around who is Friend and who is Enemy in an oppositional couplet” (2009:55). This is a facile and empty criticism. Agamben is not merely reversing these terms but instead examining their conditions of possibility: “The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that
of bare life/political existence, *zoe/bios*, exclusion/inclusion” (1998:8). But ours, we fear, is a rearguard defense. The fatigue with Agamben in our discipline will persist, we suspect, partly because his political ontology is tremendously difficult to think, let alone to square with empirical (ontic) research.

We should reiterate that these critiques of Agamben share a common lacuna. They de-emphasize if not evade Agamben’s fundamental task: to rethink the question of sovereign power beyond its exclusive juridical linkage with the territorial state and disclose it first and foremost as an ontological problem.22 Our attempt to read Agamben with postcolonial theory is intended as a preliminary attempt to clarify this aspect of his thought and indicate the necessity of a confrontation with political ontology. Our reading emphasizes that sovereignty cannot be regarded simply as the timeless feature of the state/monarch’s right to kill, but as an excess of an emergency that has now become the rule.

Reading his critique of sovereign power through Korea also provides insights into the old problem of the incompleteness of decolonization. Consider again the candlelight protests of 2008, where millions sang “Article One”. According to the conventional political historiography of Korea, the Great June Uprising in 1987 brought the military government to an end and fulfilled the people’s sovereignty. Why then did demands for popular sovereignty return to the streets in 2008? Wasn’t democracy already achieved—and with it, the realization of the words of Article One of the Korean Constitution? If not, then why has the concept of “popular sovereignty” remained the fundamental basis of “progressive” Korean politics? Isn’t this to simply repeat the 1980s in the present?

Agamben (1998:11) provides a bracing answer to this line of questions. “Until a completely new politics ... a politics no longer founded on the *exceptio* of bare life ... is at hand, every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile”. In other words, it may be that the practical value of Agamben’s analysis lies in clarifying what is not to be done. This is also Žižek’s (2009:55) argument that today “we are all potentially *homo sacer*, and the only way to avoid actually becoming so is to act preventively”. Herein lies our challenge: knowing how “to act preventively” without reproducing the politico-theological trap at the heart of sovereignty. Furthermore any form of theoretical or political resistance that does not fundamentally question its own biopolitical horizon—that link between bare life and politics which “secretly governs the modern ideologies seemingly most distant from one another” (Agamben 1998:4)—threatens to remain oblivious and ultimately embedded within precisely that wider history of metaphysics that Agamben seeks to disclose. In Korea, the reconstitution of the political will require a preventive questioning of popular sovereignty as the principle foundation of resistance. On the Korean peninsula this task bears an unavoidably geographical burden. Any attempt to transform the political implies the disintegration of that signature of Korea’s postcolonial condition—the peninsular division—which sustains the sovereign exception. Until then, notwithstanding Article One, we are all potentially *bbalgengi*. 

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Endnotes
1 While the protests were violently suppressed by the regime, their achievements were considerable (see Lee et al. 2010).
2 In December 2012, Park Geun-hye, the daughter of former military dictator Park Chung-hee, was elected President, replacing Lee. Both are from the same conservative party.
3 On 8 April 2010, progressive civil and social groups in South Korea organized “2010 Victory, People’s Sovereign Movement Center” to judge the Lee Myung-bak government and restore people’s sovereign power through voting in local elections. This suggests that even radical social groups recognize voting as the realization of people’s sovereign power.
4 Agamben (2009: 21) argues that a paradigm presupposes “the total abandonment of the particular-general couple as the model of logical inference”.
5 On Agamben’s method, see Agamben (2009: passim).
6 One could also find ambiguities in Agamben’s political writings. For instance, to confront Germany’s power in the EU, Agamben (2013) proposes constructing a new “Latin empire” around Italy, Spain and France. This proposal seems idealistic and inconsistent with his political philosophy.
7 Homo sacer is one who is caught within the sovereign ban, “which maintains itself in relation to actuality precisely through its ability not to be” (Agamben 1998:46). Agamben (1998:59) is explicit in linking the problem of the ban with Heidegger’s conception of Seinsverlassenheit, “the abandonment of the entity by Being, which, in fact, constitutes nothing less than the problem of the unity and difference between Being and being in the age of the culmination of metaphysics”. We cannot locate the problem of sovereignty narrowly in the historical-geographical construct known as “the West”; it would be better to say that the West is the time of abandonment.
8 In his Jacobin interview (Chibber and Birch 2013), Chibber posits that postcolonialism has “insisted on denying the scientific ethos and the applicability of categories coming out of the liberal enlightenment and the radical enlightenment—categories like capital, democracy, liberalism, rationality, and objectivity” (and, we should add, sovereignty). We would reply that in order to realize whatever radical potential may exist in these categories, we must recognize that they have never belonged to “the West”.
9 Some studies suggest the potential of Agamben’s insights to extend the postcolonial problematic (Gregory 2006; Hagmann and Korf 2012; Jan 2010; Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004; Springer 2013; Sylvester 2006; Wainwright 2010).
10 Springer (2013) emphasizes the link between the postcolonial and overcoming the grid of sovereignty.
11 Agamben (2005:2) stresses that the state of exception describes not only a formal dictatorship, but has become the prevalent mode of the sovereign state: “the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones”; “The clean opposition of democracy and dictatorship is misleading for any analysis of the governmental paradigms dominant today” (2005:48).
12 US military leaders divided the peninsula without consulting Koreans: “Central figures in the ... Cold War diplomacy of the United States ... drew that fateful line on the night of August 10–11, [1945] ... Dean Rusk has indicated that he had no idea of the consequences of the 38th Parallel, ignorant as he was of Korean affairs” (Cumings 2002:152).
13 Kim claims that anti-communism became the standard for nationhood, and those outside the nation became bbalgengi. But it is more precise to see bbalgengi as an instance of inclusive exclusion in the nation.
Kim argues that “the idea that it is not a crime to kill bbalgengi has not completely disappeared in contemporary [Korean] society” (2009:np).

The fact that the father-in-law of former President Roh was a member of a pro-North Korean guerrilla unit was persistently attacked when he was a presidential candidate. Thus, the production of bbalgengi is not just a matter of one’s political will or ideology, but that of one’s blood (Agamben 2000:122).

Barkan (2011) provides an insightful reading of this paradox. While Agamben does not negate differences in the relation between individuals and sovereign power, his focus lies in a more foundational condition of legal institutions.

Two terms have been used to describe these events: “Gwangju Massacre” and “Gwangju Uprising”. The former emphasizes the violence of the military suppression; the latter focuses on the popular struggle and its impacts on the democratization in the 1980s.

Katsiadas (2000) interprets Gwangju, 1980 as a commune akin to Paris, 1871. In this view, Gwangju reveals the possibilities latent of popular autonomy, as there was no disorder or pillage in the 5 days before 26 May (Choi 1989).

The US military command is suspected of authorizing the deployment of South Korean troops against the people of Gwangju in 1980 (Shin 1996:793). The Gwangju massacre thus contributed to the rise of anti-Americanism during the 1980s.

In their reading of Agamben, Edkins and Pin-Fat (2004:12) conclude: “resistance may not be possible not through emancipation or nostalgic return, but ... through either of two other strategies: first through refusal (of sovereign distinctions) and, second, through acceptance (of bare life)”. Agamben also suggests a form of resistance through the concept of profanation, which “deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized” (2007a:77).

Mesnard (2004:149) criticizes Agamben’s analysis of the camp on the grounds that it disregards the existence of various forms of life and thus the possibility of resistance within the camp. He further argues with much of the Italian left that Agamben’s theories are based on “out-of-context” speculation, and that Agamben “is trapped in his style and in his quest for a negativity” (2004:155–156). Such criticism is misdirected. It is not Agamben’s fault that the camp is a camp. The “quest for negativity” Mesnard detects is, in our view, less a reflection of Agamben than that of our world. If we feel Agamben’s theory remains speculative and lacks “context”, we need more studies that attempt to put it to work.

Ahkil Gupta (2012: 45) argues that “Agamben operates with a notion of a strong state inssofar as he assumes that a decision to declare a state of exception is tantamount to its de facto existence”. His focus on “a powerfully unified state apparatus” (2012:17) suggests a misunderstanding of the ontological character of Agamben’s view of sovereign power.

References


