Youth, Technology, and Education: Between Benjamin and Agamben

Yotam Hotam

**Abstract**

In this paper, I reflect on the modern conception of youth and its relevance or perhaps irrelevance to the growing use of technological tools like Zoom for teaching and learning. For this purpose, I focus on Giorgio Agamben’s short blog post entitled “Requiem for the Student” (posted on the internet in May 2020), which offers a sharp and to some extent provocative critique of the shift to online learning during the COVID pandemic. I argue that one of Agamben’s central arguments harks back to Walter Benjamin’s metaphysics of youth, developed between the years 1910-1917. Other works that address a range of issues connected to Agamben’s short post (e.g. bio-politics, state of emergency, contemporary conservative thought) have not raised this connection between Agamben and Benjamin. I show that Agamben’s critique of online education reintroduces a modern conception of youth. Although this conception is not explicit in his post, Agamben makes a strong case against youth’s disappearance from the educational arena. I examine the connection between youth technology and education and point to some of its broader political implications

# I. Agamben, Benjamin and Youth

On May 23, 2020, with the COVID pandemic spreading rapidly in northern Italy, Giorgio Agamben posted a short text entitled “Requiem for the Student” on the website of the “Instituto Italiano per gli Studi Fiosogici” (Agamben, 2020; Agamben, 2021). The transformation in teaching and learning at universities in Italy and around the world – the shift from classroom to online learning – stands at the center of Agamben’s critical post. “What was evident to careful observers,” Agamben writes, “namely, that the so-called pandemic would be used as a pretext for the increasingly pervasive diffusion of digital technologies – is being duly realized.” Agamben’s opposition to the “diffusion” of technology also laments the loss of the physical presence of the participants in a single educational space (for example a classroom) that is so important for the relationship between students and teachers. However, the loss of this aspect of, arguably, most educational experiences marks only a condition of a radical shift that we are witnessing and that is more crucial for Agamben. This shift is what Agamben refers to as the loss of being a student as “a form of life.” Thus:

“We are not so much interested here in the consequent transformation of teaching, in which the element of physical presence (always so important in the relationship between students and teachers) disappears definitively, as we are in the disappearance of group discussion in seminars, which was the liveliest part of instruction. Part of the technological barbarism that we are currently living through is the cancellation from life of any experience of the senses as well as the loss of the gaze, permanently imprisoned in a spectral screen[…]Much more decisive in what is taking place is something that, significantly, is not spoken of at all: namely, the end of being a student [studentato, studenthood] as a form of life.” (Agamben, 2020)

What does Agamben mean by a “form of life”? Why is it so central, even more than the physical presence of teachers and students in the same space or the sensual experiences associated with learning (even while it is dependent on them)? To answer, I believe we should note Agamben’s historical argument: He speaks of the history of Western civilization as constituted by an “inter-subjective” interaction between people coming from different places, and gathered together in designated locations that are called universities. “Universities” he argues:

“were born in Europe from student associations — universitates — and they owe their name to them. To be a student entailed first of all a form of life in which studying and listening to lectures were certainly decisive features, but no less important were encounters and constant exchanges with other scholarii, who often came from remote places and who gathered together according to their place of origin in nationes. This form of life evolved in various ways over the centuries, but, from the clerici vagantes of the Middle Ages to the student movements of the twentieth century, the social dimension of the phenomenon remained constant. Anyone who has taught in a university classroom knows well how, in front of one’s very eyes, friendships are made, and, according to their cultural and political interests, small study and research groups are formed that continue even after classes have ended.” (Agamben, 2020)

There is much to be said for Agamben’s historical overview and his rather clever emphasis on the centrality of Catholicism to the development of modern Europe. Being a student was decisive not only to how universities were formed, but, more generally, to how the modern Western political order (for example, the differentiation into “nations”) was born out of the Catholic scholarly institutions of the Middle Ages. These aspects of Agamben’s claim, however, lie beyond the scope of this short paper. Here, I wish to focus on how this historical argument frames studenthood as a “form of life.” According to Agamben, this form of life provided communal and enduring “friendships” and these invite our attention.

This framing of student life is not Agamben’s invention. Being a student as a form of life is a theme first introduced by the German-Jewish scholar, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). The connection between Agamben’s “requiem” and Benjamin’s theory of youth has not appeared in other reactions to Agamben’s post. Some scholars have rightly criticized Agamben’s downplaying of a pandemic that took the lives of so many people around the world. Others have debated a range of issues associated with Agamben’s text, including bio-politics, the “state of emergency”, the question of sovereignty, and conservative political theory (e.g. Salzani 2021; Masschelein & Simons, 2021). We are nevertheless entitled to draw a connection between Agamben and Benjamin due to Agamben's own attestation of his debt to Benjamin (for example, in his early work on violence or in his *Signatura Rerum*) (Agamben, 2009: 103-111; Agamben 2008). Standing “at the crossroad of modern intellectual landscape” (Moses, 2009: 12), Benjamin represents a significant source of intellectual inspiration for Agamben.

Youth was a central theme in Benjamin’s early writings including a paper composed in 1915 entitled “The Life of Students” (*Das Leben der Studenten*), as well as a range of essays, fragmented texts, and notes written between 1910 and 1917: “Socrates,” “The Metaphysics of Youth,” “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” and “Dostoyevsky’s The Idiot.” Some of these were published in contemporary periodicals and student journals. This selection mainly reflects the evolution of Benjamin’s theory of youth, which he developed before and during the First World War. In these writings, Benjamin developed his ideas regarding a conception of youth that had proliferated and, to some extent, been reinvented, in the German social, cultural, and intellectual atmosphere of the time. The trope of youth also appeared in the works of contemporary intellectuals like Erich Gutkind and Oswald Spengler. It can be found in Carl Jung’s archetype of Puer Aeternus (“forever young”), in Karl Mannheim’s discussion of “generationality” (Generationalität); in Frank Wedekind’s play *Spring Awakening*, in Fidus’s popular drawings and the overall new style of “art nouveau” whose German variant was referred to as “youth art” (Jugendstil). Perhaps the most salient example of the social and political impact of the new concept of youth was t. I have described this social and intellectual background in some detail elsewhere (Author 1; Author 2). Here, I wish to focus more specifically on Benjamin’s connection between youth and the trope of “the life of students” that is most in Benjamin’s essay of that name and also relevant to Agamben’s “requiem.”

In the essay, Benjamin sharply distinguishes between two forms of being a student: The student may be a member of “a community of learning” (*eine Gemeinschaft von Erkennenden*) or the object of “vocational training.” Benjamin advocates the former as an educational experience that transcends social and political conditions and views the latter as enslaved to and by social norms. A community of learning includes unmediated and enduring relations that imply intimacy and creativity. It also nurtures resistance to social control and opens up a free communal space of interaction. Vocational training, by contrast, represents the instrumental needs imposed by society and is a type of education that is constituted by social dictates.

For Benjamin, the concept of youth symbolizes the community of learning. In claiming so, he connects youth with the “life of the students.” Echoing neo-romantic notions, Benjamin represents the “being as a student,”, i.e., youth– as an erotic and creative core that “cannot be captured in terms of the pragmatic description of details (the history of institutions, customs, and so on)” (Benjamin, 1996: 37). I will return to the concept of Eros below. Here I wish to underline that for Benjamin, the true youthful spirit of education relates to an imagined human essence that escapes social conditioning. There is an essence of being human, a core of sorts, that eludes any social control. The realization of the human essence is not aligned with the requirements of society, and though it is revealed in certain social contexts (for example, that of the students in Wilhelmian Germany) it marks the quintessence of being human that lies beyond social circumstances.

It is in this context that Benjamin speaks of the Eros of youth. In so doing he alludes to the Platonic idea of elevating the human soul towards the godly, as described in the *Phaedrus* (Plato, 1952). Plato’s “chariot allegory” of two flying horses and a charioteer who struggles to keep control over the two horses that pull in opposite directions is perhaps one of the most telling images in Western thought. Plato’s charioteer pursues the “heavenly Eros” (Nygern, 1953) that represents the human capacity to transcend the worldly and to return to the godly demesne of truth, beauty, and knowledge. For Benjamin, this image represents the innate human capacity to eschew all social and historical circumstances and to enter “the kingdom of God” (Hotam, 2023: 60). Thus, youth in this context means “living and working sub specie aeternitatis,” a reference to Spinoza that he reiterates in a range of texts from this time (Benjamin, 2011: 58, 70, 90). What Benjamin calls the “perversion” of universities lies in their attempt to transform “the creative spirit into the vocational spirit” (Benjamin, 2011: 41) “All these institutions,” argues Benjamin, “are nothing but a marketplace for the preliminary and provisional,... they are simply there to fill the empty waiting time, diversions from the voice that summons them to build their lives with a unified spirit of creative action, Eros, and youth” (Benjamin, 2011: 46).

The problem with modern education that Benjamin underlines is that it is dedicated to instrumental training while stifling the youthful energy that he associates with the intimate, creative, erotic, and free (i.e. free from social requirements) community of learning. Youth, in this sense. is not a sociological or psychological category, as is common today in academic discussions of youth culture, youth organizations, or the psychology of youth. For Benjamin, youth cannot be reduced to the social and historical context in which it appears. This is also true of the concept of age – Benjamin is not identifying youth with a certain biological age (being 15, 16, or 17 years old) that comes after childhood and anticipates adulthood. Rather, he uses ontological (and as I suggest next, theological) terms to suggest a category of being. To be a youth is thus a human capacity or the potential of transcending material (e.g. social, biological, historical) reality. In his paper, Joris Vlieghe (Vlieghe, forthcoming) rightly emphasizes youth as an “ontological force” that defines us as humans. For Benjamin, this means a potential that is integral to human beings and involves transcending enslaving circumstances, including biological factors (i.e. a particular age), and social and political conditions but is not exhausted by these factors and conditions. In this sense, one may be “young” in any given biological age as much as in any social and historical context. The description of the youth houses in Jesse Torenbosch’s (forthcoming) paper seems to be apt here as well. These houses enable their educational programs to emerge from the mere presence of youths together (rather than imposing them “from above”). They also aim their activities at the “free time” of the youth, which translates into a form of resistance to any outside influences, dictates, or demands.

This is the concept of youth that Benjamin articulates in metaphysical language. I tend to agree with Vlieghe (forthcoming) that the notion of transcendence is here key. It is especially in this context that Benjamin makes use of theological language and symbolism, referring to matters like eternity, revelation, redemption, messianism, and God.

For example, his unfinished paper “The Metaphysics of Youth” entails a reworking of Meister Eckhart’s mystical allegories of youth, the godly within the human, and the awakening of the soul (Hotam, 2019; Hotam 2023). The notion of “awakening” is here vital, as it is a central theme in Eckhart’s allegoric reading of the passage from Luke 7:14 “Young man, I tell you, stand up!” (“*Adolescens, tibi dico: surge!*”) (Eckhart, 2009.) Eckhart allegorically interprets Jesus’s miracle of resurrecting a dead boy as a symbol of how God can potentially awaken his Son in every human soul (Ibid.) Eckhart expands upon the identification of the Son with the soul to express the relationship between God and a human being. In Eckhart’s thinking, the image of an awakened Son is symbolized by youth (*Adolescens*). And thus:

Why did he say “young man?”... “Young man”: All the powers that belong to the soul do not age.... Therefore, “Young man.” The masters call “young” that which is close to its beginning. In the intellect man is ever young.... Now he says, “Young man, arise.” What does it mean “arise”? “Arise” from the work, and let the soul “arise” in herself!” (Eckhart, 2009: 396).

The term “young” thus represents the divine within the soul, and the human capacity to transcend this-worldliness. To awaken youth denotes an inner development within the human soul towards salvation. Youth therefore marks an important aspect of the idea of divine presence embedded within human experience and awakening stands for its purpose and mission in this world.

When he refers to the awakening of youth, Benjamin evokes these mystical allegories and reframes them for modern secular needs. Especially in his text “The Metaphysics of Youth” he uses dense allegoric language to point to the human potential (i.e. youth) to transcend worldly temporality and that needs to be “awakened” in us all (Benjamin, 2011). “Awakening,” writes Benjamin under the pseudonym Eckhart.phil, “... is a consciousness of the unconditional value, the gaiety and seriousness of this new youth” (Benjamin 2011: 60). The idea of youth that Benjamin plays with here is fundamentally mystical. It represents for Benjamin the mission of a “new religion” in which “the spirit of youth will awaken in all.” In other words, it is the mystical opening up of “a spiritual reality” that may endow “being a student” with a meaning (Benjamin, 1996: 133.)

Youth’s theologically demarcated potential for freedom, resistance, and innovation is also what being a student as a form of life means. The form of life of being a student represents the possibility of transcending social and political conditions and forming a community that embodies this capacity. The collective experience of youth marks the potential for resisting social control – a potential that is lost not only when colonized for social and political needs but also when the type of community that supports its presence disintegrates.

Especially because of this aspect, being a student as a form of life points to what Vlieghe (forthcoming) calls in his paper “revolutionary ontological force.” Revolution in this context means eschewing the arena of politics. In tapping into mystical allegories, Benjamin’s youth also may represent what scholars have termed “theocratic anarchism”, bringing Benjamin closer to the so-called anarchic *Antipolitik* of Gustav Landauer (Guerra, 2017: 126-135; Jacobson, 2003: 28-29; Schwartz, 2015: 172-190; Schwartz, 2006, 205-219). The basis for associating his thought with anarchism lies in Benjamin’s formulation of “awakening” as resistance to social and political control. Awakening represents, one could say, an anarchic revolutionary force because it radically resists all forms of politics. Especially in Landuaer’s thinking, such anarchic revolutionary thinking brings messianic categories of redemption and the end of time to bear on the field of politics. One could argue that Benjamin, goes even further since for him this theological understanding of “anarchic revolution” is marked by the separation of the messianic potency from the actual political sphere. Politics is starkly severed from salvation (implying also the separation between cosmology and soteriology). On this basis, any form of control that “the political” may offer can only be negated, refuted, or resisted. This approach emphasizes a comprehensive refusal to participate in politics that derives from a commitment to a pure spiritual principle that is represented by youth involving a clear distancing from all available political options and radical resistance to all political ideologies. If the possibility of redemption lies beyond history (even if this does not mean that it is external to it), it also resides, ceteris paribus, beyond any concrete political realization. Accordingly, no ruler, flesh, and blood (as Martin Buber puts it) may call themselves the messiah (Buber, 1985). This does not mean that messianism is contested but rather that it is upheld by being negated.

Benjamin’s metaphysics of youth thus brings theological categories to bear on political actions. Ontology should be understood as a substitute for theology. In the context of education, his revolutionary thinking is not only an iconoclastic revolt against any enslavement to modern social and political requirements. It is also the opposite iconographic quest for an intimate, creative, enduring alternative manifested in the “community of learning.” Though articulated in worldly terms (for example in the distinction between vocational training and the community of learning), the educational alternative he seeks is a translation of theological conceptions that have been secularized for modern needs.

Agamben’s reference to being a student as a form of life, I suggest, picks up this rich and complicated theme. We may reflect in the following way on what Agamben means by the student’s form of life. Hannah Arendt, in her analysis of Augustine’s theology, consciously explores an area of thought that goes beyond Augustine’s explicit arguments and relates to what “Augustine himself has merely implied” (Arendt, 1996). Applying Arendt’s method to Agamben‘s arguments, student life implies a communal experience in the Benjaminian sense. There is a youthful essence of being a student as a form of life that Agamben brings to the fore and that refers to its ontological, indeed redemptive, nature that lies beyond all social and political conditions while at the same time defining the political.

It is this possibility of being a student, of youth in the Benjaminian sense, that is destroyed by the introduction of new technologies for teaching and learning. Arguably, the evaporation of youth, its potential for freedom, revolution, transcendence, “Eros” and redemption, marks the “civilizational break” (Diner, 1988) that Agamben refers to when he claims, for example, that exactly this type of being “which has lasted for almost ten centuries, now ends forever” (Agamben, 2020). Because of the shift from actual contact between people to the “flat” intermediation of the screen, a certain human capacity that the concept of youth represents with all its metaphysical and theological baggage comes to an end. Of course, Agamben has in mind the disappearance of the physical aspect of learning together. But physicality is important only because it provides a pre-condition to the unmediated relations and the free interactions between human beings central to Benjamin’s “community of learning.” It is this possibility of youthful communality that online learning precludes. For Agamben, the new conditions of learning negate the potential of youth that depends on such relations and interactions. Again, we should remember that youth is not a biological, sociological, or historical category but a symbol of the human potential for freedom from enslaving conditions. Without this human potential, not only will the universities meet their end (an end that in a certain sense, they deserve), but the possibility of human freedom is completely dissolved.

# II. Technology and Education

This last point invites further reflection. Agamben clearly thinks in catastrophic terms. His calamitous tone explicitly invokes Fascism (in Italy) and Nazism – the very emblems of barbarism and the termination of all things human (Adorno: 1991: 18). Take for example the punitive remark at the end of his short blog post:

“Professors who agree—as they are doing en masse—to submit to the new dictatorship of telematics and to hold their courses only online are the perfect equivalent of the university teachers who in 1931 swore allegiance to the Fascist regime” (Agamben, 2020).

This invocation of Fascism can surely be called into question. It is doubtful whether the turn to online learning around the world was ideologically oriented, or similar in any way to an oath willingly given to a totalitarian regime. It seems reasonable to attribute this type of alarmism to Agamben’s conservative outlook, perhaps a case of technophobia that resists anything technological or generically disapproves of technological progress (perhaps due to the associated growing dependency on technological tools). That being said, when reflected upon in the context of Benjamin’s metaphysics of youth, Agamben’s position evokes critical theory and my discussion below will bring the two into dialogue.

It is evident that Agamben thinks of technology from the perspective of critical theory. For him, the online education that was introduced around the world due to the pandemic and that continues to affect school culture and the climate of the classroom today marks an educational, social, and political crisis in two interconnected ways. First, as presented above, it marks a distancing from the form of life of youth that represents for Benjamin the human capacity for freedom and that is associated with what Stephane Moses (following Benjamin) called “the revolutionary energy of the new” (Moses, 2009: 108-109). This energy refers to a type of hope that is always coupled with the idea of transcendence and that especially Benjamin associated with the potential of redemption that is invested in every present moment. Agamben seems to be referring to the association between technology and education that culminates in the evaporation of the horizon of transcendence that is central to Benjamin’s metaphysics.

Benjamin was not alone in this association between education and transcendence. Most of the central figures of the Frankfurter Schule used a similar theological vocabulary. In the 1960s, for example, Theodor Adorno’s classroom lectures and radio talks on education made it clear that any secular worldview can only be understood as “a translation of theological conceptions” (Adorno, 2000: 98). In particular, critical theory invokes a “translation” or, in Adorno’s terms, a (re)conceptualization of the theological imagination. The notion of redemption, albeit separated from the possibility of its actualization in the world, was central; it informed the concept of “negativity”, perhaps the concept that is most associated with Adorno’s postwar thought (Mendes-Flohr, 1983: 634-635). In the same vein, the 80-year-old Marx Horkheimer retrospectively summarized the critical project as being “Judaism undercover” (Bielik-Robson, 2014: 63; Horkheimer, 1979). Agata Bielik-Robson brilliantly shows how the theological aspect that Horkheimer attributed to his theory also related to a type of secularized messianism that is tacitly embedded in the critical quest for emancipation from enslaving conditions (Bielik-Robson, 2014).

These comments require a much more detailed analysis than what I can provide in this paper. One point to note is that any view that fails to take into account the theological aspect of this vibrant modern intellectual legacy will fail to grasp the implicit relation between its critique of social domination, politics, and technology, and what I referred to above as the horizon of transcendence. The latter is always part of the human potential for freedom; it is perhaps the very core of what that potential means. This may be especially true for education. Without nurturing this human potential, education means – to use Adorno’s coinage – enslaving people “to the machine”; the type of education that “turns human beings into a mass” (Sherman, 2007: 35).

Agamben appears to be continuing a line of argument that is central to critical theory’s thinkers and that is captured by the trope of “youth.” He expresses opposition to the withdrawal of youth from the educational arena because this means the evaporation of the potential to transcend social and political enslaving conditions. Because it transforms a genuine interaction between people into mere digital representations, online teaching for Agamben is devoid of the unmediated, intimate, and erotic relations central to Benjamin’s community of learning. There is good reason to suppose that teaching of this sort is equivalent to what Benjamin called vocational training, the type of education that serves the instrumental needs imposed by society, and Adorno presented as enslavement.

This shift in education also represents the termination of being political, of what could be termed the “acute de-politicization” of the human being. One should not confuse Benjamin’s anti-political position (his so-called “theocratic anarchism”), with the type of de-politicized society that Agamben is concerned about. Benjamin’s messianic project is invested in and constructed for the sake of the political. The redemptive future that provides Benjamin’s metaphysics of youth with its impetus attests to this fact; it represents the hope that “suffering be remedied and society redeemed” (Gordon, 2016: 181).

I emphasize the concept of the future to indicate that this is not a concrete agenda or ideology to be implemented politically. This point seems to be especially important given the misuse of “youth” today and in the past in the name of horrific political agendas – from fascism to terrorism. Indeed, the concept is vulnerable to manipulations if it is mobilized to serve a concrete ideology. Benjamin, in contrast, conceives of the future as a messianic time that is always the “time to come” (Levine, 2014) of history that can never be a means to an ideological end. In this context, Benjamin refers to the idea of “fulfilled time.” For him, the idea of a “fulfilled time” “appears in the Bible as its dominant historical idea: the messianic time” (Benjamin 1996: 24). In messianic terms, the youthful “time of the now” can occur only as an extra-historical event within history (Kohlenbach, 2002: 34). It can be realized, one may suggest, only by not being historically manifest. In his “Theological-Political Fragment” from 1921, Benjamin shows the extent to which this point remains decisive for him. “Nothing that is historical,” writes Benjamin, “can relate itself, from its ground, to anything Messianic” (Benjamin 2006: 305-306). Benjamin’s “future” points to a messianic moment that is explicitly removed from historical temporality, albeit always exists as a potential of and within history. It is this potential that provides the hope for the redeeming of society. In this way, the concept of the future evokes not a retreat from the world in any simple sense, but rather responsibility for it.

It is appropriate to reflect in this context on Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s concept of love because it echoes the type of hope that one can find in Benjamin’s early writings (Adorno, 1939). Adorno resists Kierkegaard’s Christian focus on the love of God, not because such agape is wrong, but because it fails to bring about the social change it promises (Ibid). Like Benjamin, Adorno is committed to the world of human beings. To love, for Adorno, means to redeem society. The following, rather striking, lines from Adorno’s “Education after Auschwitz” can be read as if they had been composed with Kierkegaard in mind:

One of the greatest impulses of Christianity, not immediately identical with its dogma, was to eradicate the coldness that permeates everything. But this attempt failed; surely because it did not reach into the societal order that produces and reproduces that coldness” (Adorno, 2005: 202)

I tend to agree with Bielik-Robson’s understanding of Adorno as exemplifying a particularly modern Jewish “spiritual investment in the world” (Bielik-Robson, 2020). For her, this investment is equivalent to responsibility for fellow human beings, mirroring Benjamin’s (and Adorno’s) deepest commitments.

In his critique of contemporary society, Agamben refers to human beings who are disinterested in the world (that is the political world) and who are in this particular sense de-politicized. De-political humans are anything but “invested” in the world. With no spiritual investment in the world, the human being is reduced to nothing more than “an appendage of the machinery”, representing merely “an object of calculation” (Adorno, 1991: 98-99).

The best metaphor that encapsulates this process of de-politicization of human beings that Agamben seems to have in mind is atomization. This metaphor brings out Agamben’s complaint about the breaking down of the human being into mere pixels on the flat screen. Modern thinkers presented the isolation of human beings in what they saw, following Marx, as a more and more alienated society. Adorno’s “The Culture Industry” (1996) is one salient example of such an approach. Somewhat similarly, Zygmund Bauman points to the new remote and unreachable “liquid” reality, to which we are all connected, and from which, nonetheless, we are very much distanced (Baumen, 2000). However, while isolation brings about the distancing of human beings from each other or their alienation within a social system, atomization involves them breaking down into mere digital information. Unlike the isolation of human beings that can be produced in different contexts and through a variety of social manipulations, atomization is mainly a function of the current technological state of affairs. Rather than singling out a modern systematic structure (like a factory), one can imagine Agamben pointing to a cloud of digital information that consumes the humane. Atomization is the result of a technological social arrangement in which human beings are not only isolated but, more profoundly, dissolve into mere data.

Specifically, what is lost in this new de-politicized context is the human “signature.” I refer here to the concept of signature because Agamben’s blog post seems to hark back to the theory of signatures he presented mainly in his work *Signatura Rerum* from 2008. In Renaissance thought, a signature was what endowed a thing with its hidden essence. To reveal the essence of any given thing (that is, to reveal its signature) is the task of science. This idea had theological and more specifically mystical roots. It was taken up, according to Agamben, in the work of modern thinkers like Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s theory of youth may be thus seen as a theory of signatures because it concerns revealing a hidden human potential that Benjamin articulates mystically. Agamben can be understood as following Benjamin. He is concerned about the disappearance of a signature of education as a form of life – a particular communal experience of being among fellow human beings that the concept of youth represents and in which the Western idea of the political is rooted.

# III. Concluding Remarks

The last point shows the extent to which Agamben’s recourse to being a student as a form of life makes a case for the disappearance of human investment in the world. We have seen above for example how this investment takes our commitment to other human beings, with whom we live together and to whom we are deeply connected, as its point of departure; it is a type of responsibility to the world “that suffering be remedied and society redeemed” (Gordon, 2016: 181). For Benjamin and Adorno, the mission of critique is entangled with this notion of responsibility to other human beings that both thinkers adopted from Jewish sources (Bielik-Robson 2014). Agamben’s “requiem” expands on this point; he believes that the atomization of human beings is also their de-politicization. The community of learning that depends upon physicality, intimacy, Eros, and unmediated relations disappears, and the specific interrelations and mutual commitments that constitute it disintegrate.

This process invites the reconfiguration of the political arena in new and, for Agamben, dangerous ways. Although Agamben invokes familiar images of nihilism and fascism, he likely agrees that we are in uncharted political water. A new political reality is currently unfolding whose outcome is unforeseen by all. Especially now it seems important to at least briefly explore, following Agamben, how youth, freedom, and democracy are intimately connected and how the disappearance of one is associated with the decline of the others. Agamben may not have thought of this particular connection. Nonetheless, his critical observation may also explain education’s role in the current crisis of liberal democracy along with the ongoing waning of the support for the values that are associated with it.

Let me note two points. First, it can be argued that the crisis of liberal democracy is visible in the rise of right-wing nationalist movements and parties the world over “from the BJP in India, the Law and Justice Party in Poland, Brothers of Italy, and Fidesz in Hungary to Trumpism in the United States, and the coalition of far-right politicians and parties that constitute Israel’s recently elected government” (Schneider & Hotam, 2023). Even where the right is not in power, “racist and xenophobic political parties like National Rally in France, Sweden Democrats, and für Deutschland in Germany have increased in strength as their ideas, once deemed beyond the pale, have moved mainstream” (Ibid). These champions of what is variously called post-liberalism or illiberal democracy seem to offer an alternative that collapses the distinctions between the main political categories of liberalism – the law, the state, and the people. The rule of law becomes whatever serves the interests of the people (a rhetorical concept that need not correspond with an actual majority), with the state charged with securing its implementation (Ibid). This new illiberal vision is rooted in a particular political theology that regards nations as divine creations and their preservation as a sacred mission that ovaterrides all other (divine) laws. Yoram Hazony, perhaps one of the most vocal protagonists of this approach today, is a case in point. Hazony has been recently one of the driving forces behind the International National Conservatism movement and has helped to organize NatCon conferences across the world. In his writings, he explicitly outlines a national conservative political vision in which nations are both a theological category and a historical constant — allegedly pre-existing the institutions of the modern state (Hazony, 2022). The state, in this schema, is paradoxically required to support and sustain the supposedly organic and ethnically homogenous nation that precedes it and indeed justifies its existence. This conception of the nation as the incarnation of the will of God, as sacred peoplehood, although in secularized form, consumes the concept of the state and destroys the supremacy of the law. States are instruments for organizing nations, and the law is subordinate to the supposed best interests of the “will of the people” (or more accurately, the portion of it that is deemed politically important). The result is the effective collapse of the nation, the law, and the state into one amorphous entity that is manifest in the rise of illiberal democracies around the world today (Schneider & Hotam, 2023).

Second, the atomization of human beings can be connected to this new political vision. This association of education, technology, and world politics might seem odd. However, it is important to reflect on the conditions that enable the current political changes and how these may include also the disappearance of youth (what Agamben calls “being a student as a form of life.”) In encapsulating the human potential for freedom, intimacy, and unmediated and enduring relations, youth represents a type of togetherness in speech and action that takes into consideration other human beings, other perspectives, and the very existence of others (Arendt, 1946). This point is crucial because the democratic public space is dependent on this capacity. When Agamben laments the disappearance of a type of “togetherness” that denotes our ability to see the world from others’ point of view he underlines, even if against his best wishes, the retreat of the inter-subjective mechanisms that support and sustain democracy.

Here Arendt’s discussion of politics comes to mind because of the centrality of togetherness of this sort in her postwar writings. Like we did with Benjamin, we are entitled to connect Arendt to Agamben, because Agamben himself has stated his debt to Arendt (for example, in his early paper on violence, as well as in his celebrated *Homo Sacer*). For Arendt in particular, when we connect with fellow human beings, we put into practice a mode of thought that “by force of the imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public” (Schwartz, 2016: 152-155). It is important to note how Arendt associated this mode of thought with her concept of judgment (our capacity “to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly”). For her, following Kant, our capacity to judge involves the appeal to something common outside the self and communication with the others with whom we live together. To be among fellow human beings means to operate in a way that makes their inner world (their different points of view, different ways of thinking, different understandings) available to us, taking into consideration the plurality of ways of being in the world, the idea of freedom, the possibility of creating something new and the capacity to come to terms with others with whom I live together.

This plurality is key because it accentuates the importance of youth to the persistence of democracy. Democracy depends on the existence of plurality in form (separation of powers) and content (the existence of different points of view, different interests, and different ways of life). Connecting democracy and youth (in Benjamin’s sense) is plausible in the context of Arendt’s thought because her notion of plurality is not just a juxtaposition of, say, many faces on a screen. Plurality must include a joining together, a specific form of being-in-connection to others that harks back to the immediate and unmediated “community” that Benjamin celebrated and the loss of which Agamben laments. We may speak here of intimacy with others which is a type of being with others while possessing the ability to see the world from the point of view of our fellow human beings. In Arendt’s words, “to think with an enlarged mentality means to train one’s imagination to go visiting” (Arendt, 1989: 43).

Introducing the concept of intimacy in this context is perhaps somewhat unorthodox. Nonetheless, although Arendt does not explicitly refer to Benjamin, she echoes his notion of youth when she refers to our capacity for “visiting.” Her “enlarged mentality” is not only the capacity to communicate in some technical sense (e.g., exchanging information), but more profoundly about the visitation of others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. There is here, however, an interesting complication in Arendt’s thought. On the one hand, Arendt consistently maintains a distinction between the private and the public spheres. Intimacy and unmediated relations are, for her, exclusively private affairs. On the other hand, already in her “Origins” Arendt discusses “intimacy with all types of mankind,” which was integral to the political project of the Enlightenment and related mainly to the acceptance of the Jewish Other into society (Arendt 1958: 57). Intimacy in this context is a political category. Arendt’s going “visiting” appears to be a description of this latter form of intimacy. Can we think of anything more intimate than seeing the world from the standpoint of another? What is visitation if not a form of close familiarity from within? Intimacy is thus not alien to the type of togetherness that Arendt associates with the political.

The atomization of humans that Agamben castigates, is the opposite of this type of intimacy because it disjoins this type of being in concert. It thus destabilizes not only the energy of youth but also the political structure that is dependent on it. In Arendt’s terms, we may see it as a shift from action (*praxis*) that characterizes the public sphere, to fabrication (*poiesis*) that has to do with the satisfaction of our material needs (Arendt, 1958: 22-27). The latter, she believes, should be restricted to the private sphere of the household. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the household is also the concrete space of online education, as most students participate from home.

Within this context, the bringing together of education, technology, and the de-politicization of students (as I termed it above) involves also the neutralization of judgment. Again, we should note how judgment for Arendt is intertwined with the type of togetherness that is crucial for democracy. Arendt’s observation that there exists a modern “fear of judging” – a fear that she associates with the rule of dictatorships – is relevant, perhaps even more relevant, in today’s political world and in the current state of affairs of education (Arendt, 2003: 19). To push this idea further, contemporary fear of judging stems from the growing appeal of social-emotional learning, the practical quest for professionalism in education, the use of technological tools for teaching and learning, and the new political thrust.

Agamben’s critique of contemporary online education should be read against this intellectual, social, and political background. In a series of rather dense remarks, he echoes the relationships between youth, technology, and education. He also invites a reconsideration of its political implications. In particular, Agamben presents a political-theological remark that brings the disappearance of youth to bear on a new type of education that ceases to nurture the “visiting” of the other, the assuming of the viewpoints of fellow human beings, of other opinions, other possibilities, different social and political imaginations, that is crucial for any democratic public space. The atomization of the student through the flatting of educational interaction to images on a computer screen invites the fading away of being young and, following Agamben, of the social and political traditions that are based on its realization (including liberal democracy). What the flat screen may level is democracy, leaving room for the rise of new forms of politics, “gods”, who are coming out of the shadows to terrorize the world of human beings.

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