**Youth, Technology, and Education: Between Benjamin and Agamben**

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on the modern concept of youth, and its relevance, or perhaps irrelevance to the growing use of technological tools like “zoom” (and its equivalents) 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, to some extent provocative, critique of the shift to online learning during the COVID pandemic. I argue that in one of its central arguments, Agamben harks back to Walter Benjamin’s metaphysics of youth, developed between the years 1910-1917. This association between Agamben and Benjamin was not yet the focus of other works which address a range of issues connected to Agamben’s short entry (e.g. bio-politics, state of emergency, contemporary conservative thought). I wish nonetheless to show that Agamben’s critique of the use of online education reintroduces a modern concept of youth, even if the concept itself is not explicit in his post, and makes a strong case against youth’s disappearance from the educational arena. I examine this connection between youth technology and education, and point to some of its broader political implications

I. Agamben, Benjamin and Youth

On May 23, 2020, during the early stages of the COVID pandemic that had spread quite rapidly in north 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 such a “diffusion” of technology certainly takes into account the loss of physical presence in one educational space (for example a classroom). But it is concerned less with the disappearance of such presence per-se. Though certainly important for the relationship between students and teachers, this aspect of, arguably, most educational experiences familiar to us, marks only a condition for 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 the 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 when he talks of such a “form of life”? Why is this loss so central – more than mere physicality or the “cancellation” of sensual experiences (even if dependent of them)? To answer, I believe we should note how Agamben recourses to a historical argument: He speaks of the history of a Western civilization constituted by an “inter-subjective” interaction between people who are coming from different places, and are 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 say about Agamben’s historical overview, that underlines, rather cleverly, the centrality of Catholicism to the development of a modern Europe. Being a student is decisive not only to how universities were formed, but, more generally, to how the modern Western political sphere (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 such a historical argument frames the idea of student as a “form of life.” It is this form of life that offered according to Agamben a type of “friendship” that is communal and enduring and that should therefore invite our attention.

Such a framing of students’ life is not Agamben’s invention. A student as a form of life is a theme that was introduced by the German-Jewish scholar, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). This particular connection between Agamben’s “requiem” and Benjamin’s theory of youth was not yet made by other works in the field. Some scholars for example rightly criticized Agamben’s erroneous downplay of a pandemic that took the life of so many people around the world. Other debated a range of issues, associated with Agamben’s text, like bio-politics, the “state of emergency”, the question of sovereignty, or conservative political theory (e.g. Salzani 2021; Masschelein & Simons, 2021). Nonetheless, we are invited to make such an association between Benjamin and Agamben, because Agamben himself voiced in his studies 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 sources of intellectual inspiration for Agamben.

Youth was a central theme in Benjamin’s early writings. For example, in a paper entitled “The Life of the Students” (*Das Leben der Studenten*) composed in 1915 as well as in a range of essays, fragmented texts, and notes written between 1910 and 1917. These include the compositions “Socrates,” “The Metaphysics of Youth,” “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” and “Dostoyevsky’s The Idiot” – some of which 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. Indeed, in these different writings, Benjamin developed his own ideas regarding a concept (youth) that proliferated, to some extent reinvented, in the German social, cultural and intellectual atmosphere of that time. The emergence and rapid growth of the German Youth Movement was perhaps the most salient example of the social and political impact of the new concept of youth. The trope of youth was also visible in the works of intellectuals like Erich Gutkind and Oswald Spengler; in Carl Jung’s archetype of Puer Aeternus (“forever young”); in Karl Mannheim’s discussion of “generationality” (Generationalität); as much as in Frank Wedekind’s play Spring Awakening, Fidus’s popular drawings and the overall new style of “art nouveau” that was endowed, at least in its German variant, with the meaning of a “youth art” (Jugendstil). Elsewhere I described this social and historical background in some detail (Author 1; Author 2). Here, however, I wish to focus more specifically on Benjamin’s connection between youth and the trope of “the life of the students”, which is also relevant to Agamben’s “requiem.”

Such a connection is especially visible in Benjamin’s essay “The Life of the Students.” Benjamin starkly differentiates between two forms of being a student: On the one hand as part of “a community of learning” (*eine Gemeinschaft von Erkennenden*) for which he advocates, and on the other by being submitted to “vocational training.” While the former points to an educational experience that transcends social and political conditions, the latter is enslaved to and by social requirements. Community of learning is thus about 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, conversely, represents instrumental needs imposed by society and a type of education that is consumed by social dictates.

For Benjamin, the concept of “youth” symbolizes the community of learning. This point is then crucial because it connects youth with the “life of the students.” Echoing neoromantic notions in particular, Benjamin represents the “being” as students – what “youth” stands for – 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)” but rather eludes them (Benjamin, 1996: 37). I will return to the concept of “Eros” below. Here I wish to underline that for Benjamin, the true young “spirit” of education relates to an imagined human essence that escapes social conditioning. There is an essence of the being human, a core of sorts, that eludes any social control. Its fulfillment is thus not aligned with the requirements of society, and though it could be distilled from a certain social context (for example, that of the students in Wilhelmian Germany) it marks the quintessence of being human that lies beyond social circumstances.

In this context Benjamin speaks of the “Eros” of youth. In so doing he plays with the Platonic idea of elevating the human soul towards the godly, as described in the *Phaedrus* (Plato, 1952). Plato’s “carriage allegory” of two flying horses and a charioteer who is struggling to keep control over these two horses, pulling in opposite directions, is perhaps one of the most telling images in western thought. It includes the so called Platonic “heavenly Eros” (Nygern, 1953) that represents the human capacity to transcend the worldly and to return to godly demesne of truth, beauty, and knowledge. For Benjamin this particular image points to the human innate 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 then 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 that Benjamin underlines lies in modern education which is dedicated to the formation of instrumental training while terminating the youthful energy that is associated by him 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, which is so common today in academic discussions of “youth culture”, “youth organization” or the “psychology” of youth. It cannot be reduced for Benjamin to the social and historical context in which it makes its debut. This is also true vis-à-vis the concept of “age” – Benjamin is not identifying “youth” with a certain biological age (being 15, 16 or 17 years old), representing, say, a break from infancy and in anticipation of adulthood. Rather, he talks in ontological (and as I would suggest next, theological) terms suggesting a category of being. An age of youth is thus a human capacity, or else a 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, in particular, a certain potential integral to the human being to transcend enslaving circumstances which may include biological factors (i.e. a particular age), or 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 do not only 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 youth, which translates into a form of resistance to any “outside” influences, dictates or demands.

Such a concept of youth is articulated by Benjamin metaphysically. I tend to agree with Vlieghe (forthcoming) that the notion of transcendence is here key. Especially in relation to this notion, Benjamin alludes mainly to theological language and symbolism – pertaining 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. This 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 interprets allegorically a biblical passage, in which the miracle provided by Jesus (resurrecting a dead boy) is not an historical affair, but a symbol of the manner in which God can potentially “awaken” his “son” in every human soul (Ibid.) In his interpretation, Eckhart expends on the formula of the “son” in the “soul” to express the relationship between God and the human being. In Eckhart’s thinking, the image of an awakened “son” was 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.

In his own reference to the “awakening” of youth, Benjamin does not only evoke such mystical allegories but also reframes them for modern-secular needs. Especially in his text “The Metaphysics of Youth” he uses a dense allegoric language to point to the human potential (i.e. youth) to transcend worldly temporality and that needs to be “awaken” 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 relates in such a way to a mystical imagination. More profoundly, it represents for Benjamin the mission of the “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 the “being” a student with a meaning (Benjamin, 1996: 133.)

As such a (theologically demarcated) potential for freedom, resistance, and innovation, youth is also what the student as a form of life should stand for. A student as a form of life is an emblem of the possibility to transcend social and political conditions and form 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, the student as a form of life points to what Vlieghe (forthcoming) calls in his paper “revolutionary ontological force.” Here, however, revolution means eschewing the arena of politics. This last point seems to be crucial because in tapping into mystical allegories Benjamin’s youth also represents 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 reason for such an association lies in Benjamin’s formulation of “awakening” as resistance to social and political control. It 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. But Benjamin, one could argue, seems to go even further since for him such a theological understanding of an “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 underlines a comprehensive refusal that segues from a commitment to a pure spiritual principle that is represented by youth and that leads to a clear distancing from all the political options that were then available, denoting a 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. In such thinking, for example, no ruler, flesh, and blood (as Martin Buber puts it) may call themselves the messiah (Buber, 1985). This does not mean, however, 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 can only be understood as a substitute to theology. In the context of education, such “revolutionary” thinking stands in particular not only for an iconoclastic revolt against any enslavement to the modern social and political requirements. It also stands, at the same time, for 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), such an educational alternative is a translation of theological conceptions which are “secularized” for modern needs.

By pointing to the student as a “form of life” Agamben, I suggest, picks up this rich and complicated theme. We may reflect in this sense on what Agamben implies in his reference to the “way of life” of students. In her analysis of Augustine’s theology, Hannah Arendt for example consciously explores an area of thought that goes beyond Augustine’s explicit arguments and relates to what “Augustine himself has merely implied” (Arendt, 1996). We are presented then with a method of work that could be applied to Agamben's arguments as well. Implied is the student’s “life”, as a communal experience in the Benjaminian sense. There is a youthful essence of the “student as a way of life”, that Agamben brings to the fore and that refers to its ontological, indeed redemptive, calling that lies beyond all social and political conditions on the one hand, and that defines the political on the other.

Yet, it is this “being” young that is consumed 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. For example, when he explicitly argues 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 intermediation of the “flat” screen, what comes to an end is a certain human capacity that the concept of youth represents with all its metaphysical and theological baggage. 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 denies. For Agamben, then, the new conditions of learning negate the potential of youth that is depended of such relations and interactions. Again, we should remember that youth is not a biological, sociological or historical category but an emblem for a human potential for freedom from enslaving conditions. Thus, without the existence of this human potential not only the universities come to their “end” (and end that in a certain sense they “deserve”), but also the possibility of human freedom is completely dissolved.

2. Technology and Education

This last point seems to me to invite further attention. Agamben clearly thinks in catastrophic terms. His calamitous tone explicitly recalls Fascism (in Italy) and Nazism – the very emblem for “barbarism” and the termination of all things human (Adorno: 1991: 18). This is for example indicated in the punitive remark at the end of the 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 reference to Fascism surely justifies serious critique. It is for example questionable whether the turn to online learning around the world was ideologically oriented, or similar in any way to the “oath” willingly given to a totalitarian regime. Somewhat differently, though not less critically, it seems reasonable to attribute this type of alarmism to Agamben’s conservative outlook, perhaps a “technophobia”, which resists anything technological or generically disapproves of progress (assuming that one associates progress with a growing dependency on technological tools). However, in its relation to Benjamin’s metaphysics of youth, this position seems to be also in dialogue with critical theory and I wish to show below that it is this dialogue that may also invite our attention.

The point to note is that Agamben thinks of technology from the perspective of critical theory. For him the technological, online education that was introduced around the world due to the pandemic, and that continues to affect the school culture and classroom climate 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 – youth – that represents for Benjamin the human capacity for freedom and that is associated with what Stephane Moses (in following Benjamin) called “the revolutionary energy of the new” (Moses, 2009: 108-109).[[1]](#footnote-1) This “energy” refers to the type of hope that is always coupled with the idea of transcendence and that especially Benjamin associated with the potential of redemption, invested in every “present” moment. Thus, what Agamben seems to be referring to is the association between technology and education that culminates the modern process of the evaporation of the horizon of transcendence, central to Benjamin’s metaphysics.

But Benjamin was not alone in this association between education and transcendence. Most of the central figures of the *Frankfurter Schule* alluded to 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, critique denotes such a “translation” or what Adorno saw as (re-)conceptualization of theological imagination. The notion of redemption, albeit separated from the possibility of its actualization in the world, was here 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 of the points to note is that any view that fails to take into account the theological aspect of this vibrant modern intellectual legacy, falls short of grasping the implicit relation between its critique of social domination, politics, and of technology, and what I referred to above as the horizon of transcendence. The latter is always part of the human potential for freedom, perhaps the very core of what such potential stands for. This may be true especially 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 seems in this sense to continue a line of argumentation that is central to critical theory’s thinkers and that is captured by the trope of “youth.” He expresses an 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 to 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 thus a good reason to suspect that such a teaching is equivalent to what Benjamin called “vocational training” (the type of education that is consumed by the instrumental needs imposed by society) and Adorno presented as “enslavement.”

Second, this shift in education also stands for the termination of being political, indeed for what could be termed an “acute de-politicization” of the human being. One should not confuse, however, Benjamin’s anti-political position (his so-called “theocratic anarchism”), with the type of de-politicized society that Agamben brings to the fore. 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 a basis, attests to this matter because it represents the hope that “suffering be remedied and society redeemed” (Gordon, 2016: 181).

I emphasize the concept of “future” in order to point out that we are dealing not with 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 for example mobilized to serve a concrete ideology. Benjamin, however, underlines 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. He, for example, clearly speaks in this context of the idea of “fulfilled time.” Thus for him it is this idea of a “fulfilled time” that “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 fulfilled in history, one may suggest, only by not being historically fulfilled. In his “Theological-Political Fragment” from 1921, Benjamin shows the extent to which this point remains for him decisive. “Nothing that is historical,” writes Benjamin, “can relate itself, from its own ground, to anything Messianic” (Benjamin 2006: 305-306). Benjamin’s “future” then points to a messianic moment that is openly seperated 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 with a basis. In such a way the “future” accentuates not a retreat from the world in any simple sense, but rather the oposite resonposibility for it.

One may reflect here, for example, on Adorno’s critique of Kierkegaard’s concept of love because it echoes this 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 seems to be committed to the world of human beings. To love for Adorno thus means to redeem society. The following, rather striking, lines from Adorno’s “Education after Auschwitz” may be read as though 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 pointing to a particular modern Jewish “spiritual investment in the world” (Bielik-Robson, 2020). For her, such an “investment” is identical to a responsibility to fellow human beings, mirroring Benjamin’s (and Adorno’s) deepest commitments.

In his critique of contemporary society, however, Agamben speaks of 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 being nothing more than “an appendage of the machinery”, representing merely “an object of calculation” (Adorno, 1991: 98-99).

I cannot think of a better metaphor that encapsulates this process of de-politicization of human beings that Agamben seems to have in mind than atomization. By using this metaphor, I wish to underline Agamben’s pointing to 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, in following Marx, as a more and more alienated society. Adorno’s “The Culture Industry” (1996) is one of the salient examples 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 points to the distancing of human beings from each other or of their alienation within a social system, atomization, conversely, captures their breaking down to mere digital information. Thus, unlike the isolation of human beings, that can be produced in different contexts and by using a variety of social manipulations, their atomization is mainly dependent on current technological state of affairs. One can imagine here Agamben’s underlining not of a modern systematic structure (like that of a factory) but rather of a cloud of digital information that consumes the humane. The notion of “atomization” aims then to point to such a technological imagination in which human beings are not only isolated from one another, but more profoundly dissolves into mere data.

Specifically, what is lost in such a new de-politicized context is the human “signature.” I refer here to the concept of “signature” because Agamben seems to hark back to his “theory of signatures” (offered mainly in his work *Signatura Rerum* from 2008). In Renaissance thought, a signature was what endowed a thing with its hidden essence. To reveal this essence of any given thing (that is, to reveal its “signature”) is the task of science. This idea was rooted in theological argumentation and more specifically in mystical symbolism. It can be nonetheless traced, according to Agamben, to the work of modern thinkers like Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin. Especially Benjamin’s theory of youth may be thus seen as a theory of signatures, because it is about revealing a hidden human potential that Benjamin articulates mystically. One may further attribute this approach to Agamben who follows Benjamin. Agamben is then concerned with the disappearance of a “signature” of education as a “form of life” – a particular communal experience of being among fellow human beings that youth stands for and in which the Western idea of the political is rooted.

3. Concluding Remarks

The last point may show the extent to which Agamben’s recourse to the student “as a way of life” makes a case for the disappearance of human “investment” in the world. We have seen above for example how such an 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; a type of responsibility to the world “that suffering be remedied and society redeemed” (Gordon, 2016: 181). For Benjamin and Adorno, critique’s mission is entangled with this notion of responsibility to other human beings that both thinkers adopted from Jewish sources (Bielik-Robson 2014). Agamben’s “requiem” seems to expand on this point, because it takes the atomization of human beings to represent also their de-politization. The type of “community of learning” that is depended of certain conditions (physicality, intimacy, Eros, unmediated relations) disappears and with it disintegrate the specific interrelations and mutual commitments that it represents.

This process, in turn, invites a reconfiguration of the political arena in new and for Agamben dangerous ways. And although Agamben evokes images of nihilism and fascism that are familiar to him, he may very well agree that we are dealing with uncharted political territories, that are currently unfolding and that the outcome of this unfolding no one can foresee. Especially here it seems important to explore, however briefly, how youth, freedom, and democracy are intimately connected and how to follow Agamben through, the disappearance of one, may be 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 as much as in the continuous waning of the support for the values that are associated with it.

There are two points to note. First, one may argue that such a “crisis” 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” (Schzneider & Hotam, 2023). Even where the right has not in power “racist and xenophobic political parties like National Rally in France, Sweden Democrats, and Alternative für Deutschland in Germany have increased in strength as their ideas, once deemed beyond the pale, have moved mainstream” (Ibid). With this process in mind, the champions of what is variously called post-liberalism or illiberal democracy seem to offer an alternative that collapses the distinction between the main political categories of liberalism – the law, the state and the people – when 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).

Here it seems no less important to note that this new “iliberal” vision is rooted in a particular political theology that regards nations as divine creations and their preservation as a sacred act whose fulfillment overrides all other (divine) laws. Yoram Hazony, perhaps one of the most vocal protagonists of this approach today, makes a case in point. Hazony has been recently one of the driving forces behind the International National Conservatism movement, and he 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. But, since the nation incarnates the will of God, although in secularized form, it not only represents the idea of sacred peoplehood. It consumes the concept of the state and destroys the supremacy of the law because 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). It is this effective collapse of the people, the law, and the state that best typifies the rise of illiberal democracies around the world today (Schneider & Hotam, 2023).

Second, the atomization of the human being may be associated with such a new political vision. This connection between education, technology, and world politics might seem odd. But, it is important to reflect on the conditions that enable current political changes and how these may include also the disappearance of youth (what Agamben calls “the student as a way of life.”) In encapsulating the human potential for freedom, intimacy, unmediated and enduring relations, youth stands for a type of togetherness “in speech and in action” that takes into consideration other human beings, other perspectives, and the very existence of others (Arendt, 1946). This point seems to be crucial, because the democratic public space is arguably depended of 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 in the inter-subjective mechanisms that support and sustain democracy.

Arendt’s discussion of politics comes here to mind because of the centrality of such a “togetherness” in her postwar writings. Like in Benjamin’s case, we are invited to make such an association between Arendt and Agamben, because Agamben himself voiced in his studies 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 in such a way 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). Crucial at the point would be 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 (in following Kant) it is through our capacity to judge that we appeal to something common outside the self and communicate with (for her concrete) others with whom we live together. Thus, “to be” among fellow human beings means to operate in a way that makes their inner world (e.g. their different points of views, different ways of thinking, different understandings) available to us, taking into consideration the plurality of 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.

Plurality is therefore key because it accentuates the importance of youth to the persistence of democracy. Arguably, democracy is depended also of the existence of plurality in form (separation of powers) and in content (the existence of different points of view, different interests, different ways of life). What makes such a connection between democracy and youth plausible is that the type of plurality that Arendt had in mind denotes not just a juxtaposition of, say, many faces on one screen. It does not represent **any** type of a joining together. On the contrary. It is a specific form of being-in-connection to others that harks back to the immediate and unmediated “community” that Benjamin called to mind and that Agamben also relates to. We may speak here of intimacy with others that denotes a type of being that requires our ability to see the world from the point of view of our fellow human beings. And thus “to think with an enlarged mentality means to train one’s imagination to go visiting” (Arendt, 1989: 43).

The allusion to the concept of intimacy in this context is, perhaps, somewhat unorthodox. Nonetheless, although Arendt does not make any explicit reference to Benjamin, she seems to echo his notion of youth when thinking on our capacity for such a “visiting.” In both cases, we are dealing with an “enlarged mentality” that is not only about communication in some technical sense (exchanging information for example), but more profoundly about the visitation of others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. There is here, it seems, an interesting complication in Arendt’s thought. On the one hand, Arendt is highly sedulous in her 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 speaks of “intimacy with all types of mankind”, which was integral to the political project of the enlightenment and which related mainly to the accepting of the Jewish “other” into society (Arendt 1958: 57). Intimacy marks in this case also a political category. The “visiting” of others that Arendt speaks of seems to go along the same lines of argumentation. Can we think of a more intimate capacity than that of seeing the world from the stand point of another? What is visitation if not a form of close familiarity “from whithin”? Intimacy is thus not alien to the type of togetherness that Arendt associates with the political.

Yet, the Atomization of humans that Agamben castigates, points to the exact opposite, 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 is restricted to the private sphere of the household. Indeed, perhaps unsurprisingly, the household marks the concrete space of online education, when the majority of students tends to stay home when studying.

Within this context, the bringing together of education, technology, and the de-politicization of the students (as I termed it above) denotes 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. One may find here a good reason to suspect that 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 not only in today's political world but also in the current state of affairs of education (Arendt, 2003: 19). To push this idea further, such an existing “fear” may indicate that we are witnessing an alliance of sorts between 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 compound intellectual, social and political background. In a series of rather dense remarks, he seems to echo not only the relation 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 “visitating” of the other – indeed, 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, in following Agamben, the social and political traditions that are based on its realization (liberal democracy included). What the flat screen may therefore level is democracy, leaving room to 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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1. Moses adopts the term “revolutionary energy” from Benjamin’s The Arcades Project (Benjamin, 1999: 448). Benjamin cites Henri Focillon (1934: 12) (“l’énergie révolutionnaire des inventeurs”). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)