

Prisoners of Gun Power

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The immaculate stillness of a dim morning in snowy woods follows the title *Prisoners*, a scrolling white font on black background.¹ As light infuses the woods frame from bottom line up, a voice-over intones the Lord's Prayer ("which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come"). Two seconds later, stillness of nature is ruptured and the pronunciation of "our trespasses" marks the timid entry of a deer into the cinematic frame. As the deer wanders into the center the heart beats faster. With your perspective as viewer already aligned to the gaze of a camera shooting at point-blank range, you know what the deer does not know: s/he is becoming visible and, in becoming visible, is becoming a target. Deer or game? Life or meat? Anima/I or nutrient? The camera does not allow the viewer — or the soon to be revealed young neophyte to the life of guns — to think of this as a matter of choice, deliberation, or politics. This is a "way of life."

To make sure indecision does not tarnish this epically staged nexus of life and natural law (man has to kill to survive) the move of the deer is doubled by the move of a rifle's barrel that enters the frame from the left side. As the camera keeps moving back, the body of the rifle enters the frame in full view, then the back of two men's orange hooded heads, then, "bang." With the exception of their heads, their bodies are cropped outside the frame as the camera's backward movement freezes. The older man's hand stretches into giving the younger one a fraternal slap on the shoulder. (Sarah Palin knows how important that fraternal slap on the shoulder is. Most importantly, she knows how to strike it in one of those transvestite gestures of hers: "Don't Retreat, Instead — RELOAD!"²) The next scene will recap the congratulatory gesture and recuperate the masculine homosocial bind of the ritual. As father and son drive back home, the father (played by actor Hugh Jackman), talking over the sounds of radio news on weather, ice, slippery roads, and safety, gives the sermon:

Most important thing your Grandpa ever taught me. Be ready. Hurricane, flood, whatever it ends up being. No more food gets delivered to the grocery store, gas stations dry up. People turn on one another and all of a sudden all that stands between you and being dead is you.

The ceremonial citationality of the teaching "be ready" (father cites to son what his own father cited to him; what the son will also have to cite to his son) bestows to the life of firearms the indebtedness of both patrilineal origin and "reproductive futurism."³ To be ready does not mean to be with a firearm ready at hand in order to protect one's family. Family values and expiating violence against what is perceived as the family's besieging enemy are grounded in a specific sense of linear temporality that permeates all structures of meaning. In signifying and fortifying existence against a future threat whose only content is its foreseeability and ensuing urgency, life of arms is actually not just about a way of life but also about a temporal order of meaning. Futurity is recast as heteronormative militarization of life against queer temporality, whereas the latter is bestowed the negative power of the social order's

death drive. A son's introduction to the life of firearms takes pride in ritualizing this order of meaning: "I'm proud of you son, that was a nice shot."

On the way back, the camera following father and son on their return from hunting merges with framings of reality from the back window of the pickup truck and jolly radio tunes of *Everyday Testament*. Spatial framings of family's life and temporal framing of besieging threat become indistinguishable: we see the body of the killed deer at the back of the pickup truck but also see, through *and* beyond that, the suspicious RV and the neighborhood where evil will strike. The biopolitical machine is much more engendered with affect, pride and fear, tears, good laughs, nuptials, holy suppers, and other humors of the body than both Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben seem to acknowledge. So do the chimaera of masculine birth and the heteronormative futurity of the child and the child's safety. "Just how far will this desperate father go to protect his family?" reads the commercial logo to Dennis Villeneuve's 2013 movie *Prisoners*. Far enough to establish the safety of "gun power" as America's domestic paradigm of biopolitics, as Harvey Shapiro's essay seems to suggest.

As autochthonous as a westbound carriage of white-armed settlers, as neoliberal as the economic rationality of mid-nineteenth century "slave power" discourse (not that dissimilar from abolitionists' logic of expansionism and proslavery fire-eaters' logic of slavery's conditionality for republican freedom), Shapiro's biopolitical example puts American exceptionalism in new perspective: from abroad to home, from Guantanamo Bay to hometown family life, from the epic projection of patriotism to the protection of mundane.

Let me outline some aspects of Shapiro's use of Agamben. At a macro level, Shapiro examines the logic of structure between three works of Agamben, which are usually read and used interchangeably: *Homo Sacer*, *Means without Ends*, and *State of Exception*.⁴ The focus of his analysis is not just on how the inclusion of bare life in the political realm (biopolitical body) creates the conditions for the activity and activation of sovereign power, but, also, how bare life relates to law and particularly law's repetition through the state of exception: law is suspended through forms of power that exercise inaugural violence while claiming to exercise law preserving power. By exploring the nexus of life and law, biopolitics and law's violence, Shapiro puts in new perspective the relation between Agamben and Foucault. Whereas Foucault's analytics of biopolitics remain oriented toward an investigation of state governmentality and neoliberal rationalities, Shapiro focuses on para-state institutions (National Rifle Association [NRA]), para-citizens (citizens without allegiance to state, out of the polis) and the processes of subjection and subjectification that bestow to their filial bond a political outlook:

Everything happens as if, along with the disciplinary process by which State power makes man as a living being into its own specific object, another process is set in motion that in large measure corresponds to the birth of modern democracy, in which man as a living being presents himself no longer as an object but as the subject of political power.⁵

Whereas Agamben's paradigmatic example of bare life is the denizen (the illegal migrant, the detainee), Shapiro's paradigm is the NRA citizen. And, according to

Shapiro, this is how this citizen comes to embody the nexus of state of exception and bare life's production:

the mass shooter is included in the rights guaranteed by the second amendment up until the point when he engages in his heinous murderous act. At that point, what had been a relation of inclusion becomes a relation of exclusion. But in order to be excluded, the shooter had to be included in the larger class of those who have the right to bear arms.

This constitutive internal exclusion is characteristic, Shapiro argues, of the new, biopolitical paradigm of guns for security. As he argues, NRA's transition from marksmanship to becoming a political organization is coupled by a shift in discourse: from gunmanship as way of life to power over bare life: "Guns are embraced and supported in a discourse of physical security and insecurity. The language of gun supporters does not emphasize the sustaining of a form-of-life but, rather, power over bare life."

And this is where my reading of bare life starts to differ from Shapiro's. Bare life is not extracted, denuded from a more politically thick kind of life that preexisted. Life is realized politically in its becoming bare life. Similarly, gunmanship does not connote a state of life before biological life. Gunmanship belongs to the biopolitical machine as much as the protection of the right to defend one's family. Gunmanship is the cultural sedimentation of a biopolitical paradigm which now, in lack of a frontier, a colony, an empty space, has to invent the enemy through the becoming bare of the family's, his son's, his little daughter's life. And here, the discernment (and condemnation) of gun power for "mere life"⁶ against the law preserving violence of state (monopolized in as much as the "doctrine of the sanctity of life") enters dangerously into that grey zone of indistinguishability where the expiating force of Agamben's "means without ends" resonates dangerously with Walter Benjamin's eschatology of divine violence. The utopian urge for that educative power, "which in its perfected form stands outside the law," outside the neoliberal futurity of investment, competitiveness in the global context, and risk management, has already been coopted by the life of guns — by that expiating moment, after the deer's killing but before gun violence escalates, that moment when the father's sermon strikes without bloodshed and "by the absence of all lawmaking."⁷

1. See *Prisoners*, directed by Denis Villeneuve (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros, 2013), DVD. The film stars Hugh Jackman, Jake Gyllenhaal, Paul Dano, Viola Davis, and Maria Bello.

2. Sarah Palin, Twitter post, March 23, 2010, 10:31 a.m., <https://twitter.com/SarahPalinUSA>.

3. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

4. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); and Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

5. Here Shapiro quotes Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 13

6. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, and Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 299.

7. *Ibid.*, 297.