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# Homo Sacer in the Corporate Age: Severance, Sovereignty, and Subjugation

Homo sacer is Latin for 'the sacred man' but also 'the accursed man.' He is a figure of Roman law: a person who has been proscripted and can be killed by anybody but must not be sacrificed in a religious ritual. In early Roman religion sacer denotes anything set apart from common society and encompasses the sense of being both hallowed and cursed. Homo sacer could also mean a person expunged from society and deprived of all rights and all functions in civil religion. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben takes the concept as the starting point of his main *work Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). This concept touches on the individuals who have been by the power of law to actively separate political beings (citizens) from bare life (bodies) has carried on from antiquity to modernity, literally from Aristotle to Auschwitz.

This ideology has persisted and has been a source of inspiration for numerous media involving questions and critiques about feminist freedoms, such as *Room* (2015), black freedoms, such as *Django Unchained* (2012), and even trans freedoms, such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). These examples are, however, very individual. In modern times, the space where one's individual rights are sometimes compromised is the workspace. The Apple TV+ show Severance, released in 2022, grapples with the modern man as homo sacer along with some science fiction psychological thriller elements. Dan Erickson, its creator, reveals that the show grapples with the inhumanity of corporate life. Its characters, employees working on highly classified projects at Lumen, must undergo severance, a medical procedure that implants a

device in the brain, ensuring they retain no memories from the outside world while at work and no recollection of their job once they leave, dividing them into innies and outies.

A Severance innie a modern homo sacer in that they are not just workers but individuals stripped of a fundamental part of human experience, their continuity of self. Their existence is not a full life, it is a fragmented state of bare life that serves only as a means to an end. In an interview with NPR host Scott Simon, series star Adam Scott uses sleep as an example of something an innie never experiences:

> We feel the restorative properties of sleep, but we do not actually get to experience it ourselves. I kind of started thinking about it in sort of a tree-falls-in-the-forest question. Like, if you've never experienced sleep, then can you experience the benefits of sleep if you don't actually know what it is? - because it's not like there's a place to go nap down there. It's - you're just there to fulfill your workday (Simon).

Scott's reflection highlights a cruel paradox of the severed consciousness. The innies receive the benefits of rest yet never experience the act of sleeping. This is an example of homo sacer's liminal existence, where one is biologically alive but stripped of subjective experience. This is a 'tree-falls-in-the-forest' analogy; the innies have no memory of sleep, leisure, or personal agency, so do these aspects of life even exist for them? Scott emphasizes the fundamental limitation of the innie's existence: they are not individuals but instruments, bound to a function rather than a full human life. Even more excluded are dispossessed persons, such as Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The Caterpillar Company has been supplying Israel with military-grade bulldozers since the 1950s, and these have been used, at least since the second intifada in the early 2000s, to destroy Palestinian homes as part of land confiscations and even temporary occupation of lands that IDF forces were just passing through (Israel and the

Occupied Territories). Despite significant pressure to end its corporate participation and widespread condemnation, Caterpillar has continued to profit as part of a system that denies the Palestinians full human recognition. This lack of autonomy and recognition mirrors Agamben's notion of homo sacer and some corporate employees, factory workers, or displaced persons, be they innies, auto workers, or Palestinians, exist as an entity excluded from the protection and dignities afforded the rest of society.

Lumen is a family-owned corporation engaged in pharmaceuticals, medical research and even chargeable causes. The founder, Kier, wrote a manifesto that the innies follow the word of God. The company retains its innies morale with a museum known as the 'Perpetuity Wing' containing all the founders and their teachings, much like Johnson and Johnson's, a company in New Brunswick, New Jersey, that has a museum on campus dedicated to its founder. This museum is not open to the public. It is just for the employees. A Severance innie exists within a rigid system of corporate control, where incentives and punishments are carefully designed to manipulate behaviour. Contrastingly, 'The Break Room' serves as a harsh disciplinary measure, ensuring compliance through psychological torment. The employees are forced to repeat a script hundreds or thousands of times until they are physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted, but more importantly, like in 1984, until they believe it. The script:

> Forgive me for the harm I have caused this world. None may atone for my actions but me, and only in me shall their stain live on. I am thankful to have been caught, my fall cut short by those with wizened hands. All I can be is sorry, and that is all that I am (In Perpetuity 00:46:21 – 00:46:41).

These two spaces reflect the extremes of control through indoctrination and punishment, shaping the innies' perception of reality. These spaces exemplify a system of control reliant on

reward and punishment, constructing a reality where innies internalize corporate values not by choice but through coercion. Indoctrination and coercion are not the only ways modern corporations control their workers. Coca-Cola, for instance, has been implicated in severe abuses of labour, including the privatization of water resources in India (Mathiason), the kidnapping and torture of workers attempting to unionize, and the assassination of union leaders in Columbia (Bacon). Like the two opposite rooms, these are ways to not only exploit labour but also shape the conditions of their existence, determining who has access to resources, who may organize it, and who must suffer to maintain their profits.

Even the term Lumon sounds liminal, a space between, in this case, rights and no rights, citizen and bare life. This echoes the concept of homo sacer, the figure reduced to existence without political agency, stripped of protections and left in a liminal state. Corporations, in their pursuit of power, erode individuality and autonomy, manufacturing controlled narratives that shape and manipulate the world, further blurring the line between personhood and disposability. Suppose the modern subject is increasingly precarious, trapped in a cycle of consumption and surveillance. In that case, resistance must begin with reclaiming autonomy, questioning imposed narratives, and recognizing the ways in which sovereignty is manufactured and withheld.

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