

Requiem for the Students

by **Giorgio Agamben**

A translation of a short intervention by Agamben on the blog Diario della crisi at the website of the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici (23 May 2020). As in many of his recent blogs, Agamben refers specifically to developments in Italy.



As we foresaw they would, university lessons next year will be held *online* [in English]. What was evident to careful observers — namely, that the so-called pandemic would be used as a pretext for the increasingly pervasive diffusion of digital technologies — is being duly realized.

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. Universities 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.

All this, which has lasted for almost ten centuries, now ends forever. Students will no longer live in the cities where their universities are located. Instead, they will listen to lectures closed up in their rooms and sometimes separated by hundreds of kilometers from those who were formerly their classmates. Small cities that were once prestigious university towns will see their communities of students, who frequently made up the most lively part, disappear from their streets.

About every social phenomenon that dies it can be said that, in a certain sense, it deserved its end; it is certain that our universities reached such a degree of corruption and specialist ignorance that it isn't possible to mourn them, and the form of life of students, consequently, has been equally impoverished. Two points, however, should remain firm:

1. 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. As happened then, it is likely that only fifteen out of a thousand will refuse, but their names will surely be remembered alongside those of the fifteen who did not take the oath.
2. Students who truly love to study will have to refuse to enroll in universities transformed in this way, and, as in the beginning, constitute themselves in new *universitates*, only within which, in the face of technological barbarism, the word of the past might remain alive and something like a new culture be born — if it will be born.

— Giorgio Agamben, 23 May 2020