PART TWO

The Politics of Going Unnoticed

Going unnoticed begins as little more than an attempt to evade both the sovereign’s gaze and the everyday demands for normative behavior. In the thresholds that open between the public and the private, visibility and invisibility, and democracy and dictatorship, bare lives can attempt to restore the potential for dissensus. During the Sixties, the politics of going unnoticed imagined by Calbert Casey, Juan Filloy, and Armonía Somers takes the form of disagreements with the more visible and audible politics of the era. In particular, each author writes about bare lives looking for a way out of the state of exception or for a way to disagree with the surveillance techniques of modern biopolitical institutions and societies by going unnoticed within them. In this section, I analyze Casey’s essays on being a committed writer in the Cuban Revolution, as well as the seemingly unimportant protagonists in fictional narratives by Filloy and Somers who go unnoticed in order to engage in dissent and disagreement within a highly saturated public sphere.

Since the earliest Greek formulations, politics has been conceived as those matters that came into light within the polis where economic exchanges occurred in and around the agora in order to be subjected to debate for the good of the community. Jürgen Habermas explains that the Greek public sphere was the realm in which the unrestrained masters of a household came together to discuss matters of public or communal concern: “Only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all” (4). Neither dependent upon presence in the city, nor seeking full visibility in the public sphere, the politics of going unnoticed would be meaningless within this classic framework.
However, Habermas continues to trace the transformation of the public sphere through the twentieth century. In sum, he examines how the Greek division between the public and the private spheres loses its clarity. The two spheres infiltrate one another as the market economy grows and globalizes, as the State is called upon to intervene into private business transactions to ensure their success in a global market—though despised when it attempts to regulate labor conditions or environmental responsibility—and as the masses enter into political conflict and negotiate the competing messages circulating in the media and the culture industries (141–46). What interests me is not Habermas’s intent to revive a rational-critical debate in the public sphere but his argument that the classic Greek divisions between private and public, between the visible and the invisible, do not adequately describe social, economic, and political relationships in the twentieth century.

Going unnoticed in the Sixties is not an act that takes place exclusively at the margins of political spaces nor in between different political spaces; one may go unnoticed just as easily near the perceived centers as in the margins. In fact, going unnoticed is not dependent upon an essential relation to either a margin or a center, concepts which are practically impossible to define in the wake of the debates on modernity, postmodernity, and peripheral modernity in Latin America. Rather, the space in which the politics of going unnoticed takes place is better defined as the state of exception. In Homo Sacer, Agamben redefines the space of politics for the contemporary world: “Every attempt to rethink the political space of the West must begin with the clear awareness that we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between zoë and bios, between private life and political existence, between man as a simple living being at home in the house and man’s political existence in the city” (187). The spatial binaries of political discourse are collapsed into a zone of indistinction, which prohibits the facile structuring of that which is inside or outside, communicable or incommunicable, voiced or silenced, of a particular judicial order or sovereign state. Thus, Agamben shifts focus from these binary distinctions—to which must be added that of visibility and invisibility—to the human body that may be killed insofar as it is a body that is always already involved in a political order.
This order is what Agamben calls “the state of exception,” but he argues that it has become the norm for political organization even when the constitutional rule of law appears to be in place: “The state of exception is not a dictatorship (whether constitutional or unconstitutional, commissarial or sovereign) but a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations—and above all the very distinction between public and private—are deactivated” (State of Exception 50). In theory, these powers should only be invoked in times of great emergency when the sovereign must act paradoxically by suspending the law in order to guarantee the future of the law. However, Agamben locates variants of the state of exception as the foundation of modern constitutional states throughout the West. He chooses “state of exception” as the phrase to discuss what in German theory is termed “Ausnahmezustand” or “Notstand,” “state of necessity”; in the Italian and French traditions is called “emergency decrees” and “state of siege,” as in “état de siège fictif”; and in Anglo-Saxon theory, “martial law” and “emergency powers” (4). Building from this analysis, Marina Franco and Mariana Iglesias have shown that the phrases “estado de sitio” and “medidas prontas de seguridad” have been used in Argentina and Uruguay, respectively, to name this type of juridical practice (92). Regardless of how they are named, the suspension of the law tends to be motivated more by an individual, a party, or a collective of governing bodies to secure their own sovereignty, both political and moral, than by the need to protect the constitutional foundations of a nation-state.

In my analysis, those who go unnoticed do so because they understand that the state of exception has become the norm and that there is no outside to which they might escape. Within the state of exception, their bodies become “nuda vita,” bare or naked life. A bare life is not simply Aristotle’s zoë, the animal-like human being who has yet to enter into public life or the political sphere, the one who remains silent and invisible. Instead, this form of bare life, which is irrevocably tied to a political order, takes the form of the homo sacer—the life that can be killed but not sacrificed, the body or, better yet, the person who may be abandoned by the law in the state of exception. Once abandoned, he or she may be killed with impunity. Since the normal rule of law has been suspended, his or her killing constitutes, “neither capital punishment nor a
sacrifice, but simply the actualization of a mere ‘capacity to be killed’” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 114).

Since the countryside is no longer a refuge from the political city, and the public-private divide no longer adequately describes social functions, then the following questions arise: To what extent can one engage in politics while going unnoticed in a crowded, urban center or in pseudo-isolation in the countryside? In what ways does going unnoticed restore the possibility of engaging in dissent without clamoring for a voice under the bright lights of the political arena? In what follows, I answer these questions by building a definition of politics as a means of engaging in dissensus within the overcrowded and saturated political environment of the Sixties in Latin America. Those who go unnoticed are not, or at least are not yet, the subjects who are interned in camps or killed with impunity, but they find themselves in incredibly vulnerable positions that at times lead to their exile, imprisonment, or death. Their politics will be founded on two irresolvable paradoxes: 1) the modern state of exception has become the rule that guides Western biopolitical relationships wherein the law is suspended in order to guarantee the future of the law and 2) radical democratic politics can only function as a never-ending tension between bids for liberty and bids for equality that must be guaranteed simultaneously from above and from below. Those who go unnoticed engage in politics by opening a place for disagreement within a highly saturated and inescapable political space. Along the way, they attempt to deactivate the divisive machines whose barriers serve only to order and control their lives.