Rethinking government and its economy with Giorgio Agamben: The *homo sacer* in alternative entrepreneurship

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Abstract
Giorgio Agamben argues in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011) that a theological remnant has survived since the medieval period that today makes it impossible to think of government and economy, or ethico-political questions and the administration of a society’s resources, separately. This conflation can be recognized in today’s growing trend of alternative entrepreneurial ventures that aim to merge social and economic value creation in response to shrinking welfare states. ‘Alternative entrepreneurship’ merges organizational goals and values with those of their members with the aim to increase innovation and productivity, and to spur social change. Rather than asking if and how alternative entrepreneurship can solve social problems, the present article contributes to a sociological understanding of the special kind of humanism embedded in these ventures. Drawing on Agamben’s work, this article theorizes the process that enables the conflation of personal and organizational values, and of ‘government and its economy’. The contribution is based on an ethnographic study of an IT company, founded in Hungary around 2010, and its engagement in the Budapest Pride Parade, in a Roma settlement, and in a mission to help Syrian refugees. Following Agamben, we think through these interventions as ‘zones of indistinction’ where organizational boundaries are dissolved, where contradictory values are conflated, and where the participants are positioned as *homines sacri* whose humanity is at stake. This article shows how the encounters within these zones enable a merging of idealism and economic gain, turning the company itself into a zone of indistinction.

Keywords
alternative entrepreneurship, anti-racism, biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben, Hungary, LGBTQ rights

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Giorgio Agamben (2011) traces the idea of Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’, which ensures that the market generates the best possible society, back to the problem of divine providence in medieval theology. The division between transcendence and immanence was in medieval theology mended through the belief in a God who maintains a ‘divine government of the world’ (Agamben, 2011, p. 71) but without meddling in the affairs of humans. According to this notion – this ‘governmental machine’ – we live in the best of all worlds as it is created by God, and the economic system must therefore be inherently good. This theological remnant has survived throughout modernity and ‘has rendered the democratic tradition incapable of thinking government and its economy’ separately (Agamben, 2011, p. 276). In his work, Agamben critically examines when a skewed economic rationality replaces politics – how a calculating, biopolitical approach to human life has enabled for example slavery, totalitarianism and war (Agamben, 1998, 2004, 2005), eugenics (Agamben, 1998) and concentration camps (Agamben, 1999). However, the last decades have seen the rise of a different kind of conflation of ‘government and its economy’: the growing trend of ‘alternative entrepreneurship’ in response to both the withdrawal of the welfare state (Down, 2006), and to the lack of authentic ethical concern in conventional Corporate Social Responsibility efforts (Baron, 2007). Through social entrepreneurship (Barinaga, 2013), sustainable entrepreneurship (Hockerts & Wüstenhagen, 2010) and ecopreneurship (Galkina & Hultman, 2016) entrepreneurs take it upon themselves to solve political, social and green problems, and research in this area is predominately optimistic.

The present article does not ask if and how alternative entrepreneurship can merge social and economic value creation; instead, it contributes to a sociological understanding of the kind of humanism presupposed in that very question – an aspect of ‘ethical’ companies that is undertheorized (Fleming & Jones, 2013, p. 67). We follow Ek et al.’s (2007) call for empirical studies of organizational subjectivities informed by Agamben, and use his theoretical framework to study the implicit notions of sociality and humanity that are produced when alternative entrepreneurial organizations set out to solve social problems in the borderland between the market and an ethico-political domain. The article thus offers a sociological rethinking of the social relations that makes it possible to conceive of companies as ‘ethical’, and of employees as socially engaged activists. It focuses on the IT company HungUS.com (pseudonym) founded in Hungary around 2010. The company offers a digital platform aimed at enabling their many millions of users to better visualize and share ideas. The relationship between ‘government and its economy’ is conflated in the company’s marketing language: the platform is framed both as a facilitator of democratic dialogue and freedom of speech, and as a commercially viable product designed for business meetings as well as educational contexts. Economy and politics are also amalgamated through the everyday practices at the company, as employees are supported to engage in a number of social issues in Hungary.

Through ethnographic visits to HungUS.com’s office, and through participation in the company’s social interventions, we examine their engagement in the Budapest Pride Parade, in a poor neighbourhood where the majority identifies as Roma, and with Syrian refugees who are camping in central Budapest. This engagement not only aims to ‘create a better future’, which is one of the company’s core values, but is also considered to spur innovative product development, and to contribute to the cultivation of ‘openness’ – an
atmosphere of curiosity and high aspirations, free of prejudice and presuppositions. At HungUS.com, employees are encouraged to bring their creative identities into the company ‘to build the brand from the outside-in’ (Endrissat et al., 2017, p. 489), while employees at the same time gain personal recognition by engaging with social issues from the inside-out. Endrissat et al. (2017, p. 510) suggest that capitalizing on ‘desired identities’ by enabling an inside-out/outside-in dynamic is a ‘promising business model’. However, we will not discuss the potential economic benefits of this dynamic between inside and outside. Instead, we draw on Agamben’s work to theorize the normative implications of the managerial efforts to merge personal and organizational identities.

To critically rethink ‘government and its economy’ through the example of HungUS.com, we use Agamben’s topology (Agamben, 1998, p. 15; see also Ek, 2006) – his theorization of how spatial and conceptual boundaries reciprocate in the production of communities. We also make use of Agamben’s (1998) homo sacer, a liminal figure who is excluded from the state yet central to its definition. In resonance with René ten Bos’s (2005, p. 18) reading of Agamben, we want to think through HungUS.com, not as a ‘citadel of order’, but rather as ‘a “threshold” where people routinely pass from order into disorder and from disorder into order’, in the shape of privileged homines sacri. We refer to this continuous passing between chaos and order, inclusion and exclusion, and politics and economy as ‘Möbius management’, after the geometrical figure whose inside turns into an outside and back again. With this specific term, we do not designate a certain organizational structure or a blueprint for efficient management, but the manner in which HungUS.com’s emphasis on ‘openness’ works as a form of neo-normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011) through which employees’ values and engagement are transformed into apolitical universalist sentiments spurring action, innovation and community within the company. This transformation enables the company to engage in pro-LGBTQ and anti-racist interventions without getting involved in historical and political debates, in a country where the leading conservative party advocates traditional Christian values, a strong ideal image of the nuclear family, and an ethnically homogeneous society (Korkut, 2014). As we shall argue, Hungary’s political context accentuates the performance of Möbius management. In turn, Möbius management reinforces the inseparability of government and its economy.

In the next section, we further engage with and explain Agamben’s topology. After an account of our methodological approach, we present an analysis of HungUS.com’s social interventions. We conclude by suggesting that the conflation of person and employee through Möbius management can be regarded as the micro-level effect of the persistent conflation of government and economy in capitalist, democratic societies.

**Agamben and the organization**

Studies applying Agamben’s work in analyses of contemporary society have mainly taken a sociological approach to state control and oppression, critically examining refugee camps and the detention of asylum seekers (Darling, 2009; Tyler, 2006), political and economical crises (Farias & Flores, 2017; Kioupkiolis, 2014), and large-scale violence (Adams & Erevelles, 2017; Eisenhammer, 2014). Yet, Agamben (2005; see also ten Bos, 2005) suggests that marginalization, crises and violence are necessary features of a
permanent ‘state of exception’ in contemporary capitalist societies. This means that to understand contemporary society, it is equally crucial to study the usual state of capitalist affairs – including influential and successful companies. Therefore, the present article combines sociological advances of Agamben’s work with insights from organization and management studies to contribute to an understanding of the ‘fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 181).

Essential for this understanding is Agamben’s (1998, p. 37) use of a ‘complex topological figure’, the Möbius strip, a strip where one end has been turned 180 degrees and then connected to the other end, so that the inside of the strip passes into outside, and vice versa. Agamben uses the Möbius strip to highlight the fact that any inclusion must include an exclusion, making any distinction inherently fragile. Agamben argues that the fragility of the inclusive exclusion is used to secure power structures: Western liberal democracies rely on a Möbius logic – and organizations too, we suggest. Fleming (2014a) posits that organizational control is created today, especially in high-knowledge companies, through ‘biocracy’ (Fleming, 2014b), a form of ‘regulation that camouflages itself through moments of spontaneous selfplanning, extra-employment networks and even generosity’ (Fleming, 2014a, p. 2). This ‘neo-normative control’ is established when employees are invited to ‘bring their selves to work’ (Endrissat et al., 2017; see also Fleming, 2014b) and to subject themselves to their own control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011; Nyberg & De Cock, 2019). A biocratic organization thus operates through what we call Möbius management: it enables a continuous passing in and out of formal and informal spheres, work and non-work, and personal and company values (cf. Fleming, 2014a). Through Möbius management, the employee is simultaneously excluded from the organization and included within it, as an autonomous visionary and as a passive resource for organizational control, as person and instrument.

This form of control is not merely a normative disciplining of the employee, but an extension of ‘a fundamental biopolitical fracture in the structure of the West’ (Edkins, 2000, p. 20) identified by Agamben. As theorized by Agamben (1998, pp. 8ff.), the innovation of the state and the notion of the citizen is dependent on a biopolitical governing of ‘life itself’, made possible through a Möbius strip constellation of zoē, biological life in a state of nature, and bios, political life lived within a state with the rights and obligations associated with citizenship. Inhabitants of shantytowns, urban ‘ghettos’ and refugee camps, as well as undocumented migrants, are rendered in a liminal state between zoē and bios: political life turned into ‘bare life’ (Agamben, 1998; Diken, 2004; Diken & Laustsen, 2002). In these ‘zones of indistinction’ – exclusionary zones yet included within the state’s border – fundamental rights are suspended, and zoē and bios are conflated (Agamben, 1998, p. 18; Diken, 2004). Agamben (1998, pp. 71ff.) refers to the inhabitant of the zones of indistinction as a homo sacer, the sacred human. In Roman law, the homo sacer was a person who had been sentenced by the state to life as an outlaw. The homo sacer was no longer subject to the law, but could be killed without penalty. This figure is thus excluded from the state’s concern, yet used to define the citizen – ‘an inclusion of what is simultaneously pushed outside’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 18).

Zones of indistinction and the homo sacer are according to Agamben integral to understanding regular citizenship and the business as usual of state administration (see Frenzel et al., 2014), and even more so in present times, as according to Agamben, ‘the
realm of bare life . . . gradually begins to coincide with the political realm’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 9). Anti-terror legislation, immigration policies and mass-surveillance function today as reminders that inhabitants of democratic nation states exist in an all-encompassing ‘zone of indistinction’ – a place where bios can pass into bare life at any moment (Agamben, 1998, 2005). This impending threat enables a treatment of each citizen as both a free autonomous individual in accordance with the Enlightenment ideal, and as a statistical figure and resource for governing (Agamben, 1998, p. 18; Diken, 2004). The possibility of sovereign state interventions into people’s lives thus implies, as Alt (2011, p. 148) puts it, ‘inclusion for those who accept its specific conception of being human but (inclusive) exclusion for those who refuse it’ (Alt, 2011, p. 148).

In line with Ek et al. (2007), we regard the contemporary biocratic high-knowledge companies as ‘benevolent’ zones of indistinction – zones that ‘repeat the logic of the exception for the “winners”’ (Diken, 2004, p. 97; see also Ek et al., 2007). Although these companies are usually places of privileges that stand in sharp contrast to the zones of indistinction discussed by Agamben, these benevolent zones are nevertheless places where bios and zoe exist simultaneously. Here, employees are addressed as bios through workplace democracy, ‘flat’ organizational hierarchies and internal business ethics programmes. Nonetheless, employees are also treated as zoe: to ensure productivity employees are carefully protected from a chaotic ‘outside’, and their bodies are meticulously monitored and cared for through company health care, in-house restaurants and ‘mood management’ (see e.g. Fleming, 2014b; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). To keep the privileges associated with organizational membership, employees need to accept the ‘specific conception of being human’ (Alt, 2011, p. 148) implied in the normative framework of the organization. Employees can thus be said to gain a status as bios only through accepting their role as organizational resources – as zoe. This is what we refer to as Mobius management: organizational control asserted through the continuous passing between order and disorder, inclusion and exclusion, and personal sphere and professional duties. Mobius management thus reinforces the inseparability of bios and zoe, and by extension also the inseparability of government and economy.

In what follows, we will look closer at what happens when benevolent zones of indistinction intersect with marginal and disadvantaged zones in a case of alternative entrepreneurship. Through allowing employees to pass between a privileged zone of indistinction, and marginalized zones of indistinction where life’s fundamental precariousness is exposed, employees’ liminal position between bios and zoe is accentuated, and the conflation of government with its economy – and ‘the realm of bare life . . . with the political realm’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 9) – is reinforced.

**Applying Agamben’s paradigmatic method**

Agamben mainly draws on social theory, theological texts and juridical documents to explore the theological root of concepts that characterize the understanding of society and organized life in the West (Agamben, 1998, 2011; Kotsko, 2013). His approach has consequently been accused of being detached from empirical cases (Collier & Lakoff, 2014), of being ahistorical (Kotsko, 2013), and of going too far in its abstractions and generalizations (Kalyvas, 2005). Agamben’s work has attracted interest among organizational theorists
during the last decade, although empirical Agamben-influenced studies of organizations are rare (Costas & Grey, 2019; Jones & Munro, 2005; Sørensen et al., 2012). There is thus a need for empirical studies to expand Agamben’s framework and its applicability to contemporary capitalist society, and especially so in the growing popularity of ‘alternative’ forms of organizing (Parker & Parker, 2017).

The present study adopts an approach of ‘profanation’ (Agamben, 2007): rather than attempting to lay bare a truth behind the glorification of business leaders and the veneration of the invisible hand of the market, a profanation is a retelling of these myths from a new angle. This means in our case that we bring back the idealism of purposeful businesses to daily ‘profane’ work (see further Śliwa et al., 2013). This article thus offers a suggestion for how Agamben’s topology and his conceptual ‘jewel box’ (Dean, 2017, p. 201) can be applied to the lived reality of organizational spaces.

Through multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) ethnographic teamwork (see e.g. Islam, 2015; Smets et al., 2014) we gathered the empirical material during eight visits lasting between a few days and a week each. We visited the Budapest and San Francisco offices, walked with HungUS.com in the Pride parade (2015 and 2017), and participated in a renovation project in a Roma settlement (2013 and 2015). We have thus interviewed, observed and shadowed the co-founders, managers on all levels, and employees at all departments including software developers, designers, marketing staff, human resource managers and ‘mood managers’; and people connected to the social interventions, such as locals in the Roma settlement and members of a charity operating there, as well as organizers of Budapest Pride and activists walking in the Pride parade. The material also includes observation notes of around 100 transcribed pages, and video documentation of the office, the Pride parade and the Roma settlement. The present article accounts for only a limited amount of the empirical material, to the benefit of a theoretical discussion of the topological commonalities and differences of three separate interventions.

To analyse the material we regard HungUS.com as a paradigm in Agamben’s (2009) sense of the word. For Agamben, a paradigm is an example that points to a general rule that is impossible to formulate without the example. A paradigmatic method relies on analogies and moves ‘from singularity to singularity’ to expose a rule (Agamben, 2009, p. 22). The example is thus never abandoned in favour of abstractions: ‘Paradigms establish a broader problematic context that they both constitute and make intelligible’ (Agamben, 2009, p. 17). We thus analyse HungUS.com’s alternative entrepreneurship as a paradigmatic case of the ‘benevolent’ zone of indistinction and its role in subjectification processes among the privileged of work organizations influenced by values fostered in liberal democracies. This means that in applying the work of Agamben we pay particular attention to inclusive exclusions and zones of indistinction – to the Möbius strip topology as it is realized in the ideals, values and practices in this alternative entrepreneurial venture.

**Encounters in three zones of indistinction**

In this section, based on observations and employees’ accounts, we show how HungUS.com enters three zones of indistinction: the Budapest Pride Parade, the yearly renovation project, and the support of Syrian refugees. In these zones
employees are placed in situations where their identifications are challenged, and where individual and organizational goals are conflated.

The Budapest Pride Parade and depoliticization

Around 2010, companies began to take an interest in the Budapest Pride Parade. In 2013, some of these companies, including HungUS.com, formed a network that helped to attract other companies to the parade. The number of officially participating companies grew exponentially during the following years. This network was soon turned into a formal business network that today also promotes workplace diversity and ‘openness’ – a concept that is crucial to HungUS.com’s engagement in Budapest Pride. In interviews with the business network’s CEO, as well as HungUS.com’s employees, managers and founders, ‘openness’ is vaguely defined – it is said to mean to ‘think outside the box’ and to ‘go outside of one’s comfort zone’, and corresponds to an ideal of creative individuals free from prejudice and fixed identities. However, ‘openness’ is also connected to entrepreneurial success – the Communications Lead underlines that to set aside prejudices and only ‘judge people based on their performance’ ensures that the company can identify and hire the most qualified applicants. To secure a culture of openness, recruiters evaluate potential employees with regard to whether they have a ‘general open attitude’ and if they are a ‘cultural fit’, the Director of Customer Care explains.

According to the company’s CEO, HungUS.com was founded with a wish to bring Western ideas about democracy and entrepreneurship to post-communist Hungary, and to promote diversity in the workplace and in society overall. HungUS.com’s ‘openness’ thus poses a twofold challenge to the authoritarian nationalist-conservative agenda of the current government, which opposes both a neoliberal ‘open’ market economy (Wilkin, 2016, pp. 167ff.) and a cultural ‘openness’ towards immigrants and ethnic minorities, as well as different expressions of sexual identity (Korkut, 2014). This contrast has led to a recurring worry among employees that ‘openness’ itself – the eradication of boundaries – can foster a solipsist and exclusionary environment. The metaphor of a ‘bubble’ is recurring in interviews: ‘we are in a bubble in HungUS.com because we share the same values’ (a human resources manager), ‘HungUS.com is a frickin’ bubble here in Hungary’ (a market analyst), and ‘HungUS.com is a bubble, it’s isolated, its community is extraordinary compared to an average Hungarian community’ (an engineer).

The idea of ‘openness’ risks deflation if it is not put into relation to an organizational outside. It is here that the social interventions become central: through these interventions the company ‘bubble’ is momentarily burst, and employees accumulate experiences by ‘doing something physical, getting out of [their] comfort zone’, as a manager expresses it. The Communications Lead explains that this ultimately benefits the company:

[I]f we can help [the employees] to grow, if we can give them this kind of experience that builds them, then actually they will be better people, better humans. And if you have better people working on a product, then obviously you can have a better product in the end.

Through the interventions, employees are allowed to act out their beliefs that they associate with a sense of self while they actively contribute to the shaping of an organizational
identity – which is assumed to boost productivity. We will consider these interventions as ‘zones of indistinction’ where organizational inclusion is dependent on a temporary exclusion and openness towards an organizational outside, and where employee-as-person and employee-as-instrument are conflated.

From the point of view of HungUS.com the Pride parade is best understood as a forum where HungUS.com’s openness can be promoted. HungUS.com’s CEO, one of the founders, is openly gay and a public figure in Hungary – in an interview he explains that he hopes that his public appearances counteract prejudice against LGBTQ people in Hungary. Yet, the Communications Lead prefers not to speak of HungUS.com’s engagement in the parade as an LGBTQ issue: ‘It’s exactly the opposite – it’s an openness issue.’ He explains that by walking in the parade in the name of ‘openness’, they celebrate diversity as such, including for example gender diversity and ethnic diversity. The openness-promoting business network, co-founded by HungUS.com, coordinates its network of companies in the parade. The companies walk together in a separate section – the manager in charge of social initiatives at HungUS.com describes it as a parade within a parade. She tells us in a conversation that many companies that would feel hesitant joining the Pride parade have a more positive view of the politically neutral initiative of the business network. This has spurred a heated debate between the business representatives and activists during Pride parade planning meetings, as many LGBTQ rights activists want the parade to be a politically charged event. The manager seems frustrated by this, because according to her, everyone wants to achieve the same goal: a more open and accepting society. The CEO of the business network explains that they seek common ground with the activists by trying to specify their different roles in the parade. She says that the business network participates in the parade to celebrate diversity in general, but that she understands that the LGBTQ rights activists in the parade chooses a different methodology.

Favouring ‘openness’ over LGBTQ rights depoliticizes the companies’ participation in the parade. This is Agamben’s topology materialized: the companies remain excluded from Pride as an inclusion; they are separate from the rest of the parade in their own section, but reaffirm the ‘inside’ of the parade by their excluded presence. The companies have their own parade float with DJs, rock bands and people dancing and enjoying drinks, dressed in T-shirts with company logotypes. Participants joining with the business network are asked not to express strong political messages on banners and placards when walking with HungUS.com and the business network. Before the 2015 parade, the Social Initiative Manager explained that ‘our logo shouldn’t be in the same picture’ as strong political messages, and therefore, she and the others in the business network keep an eye on their section of the parade to ‘keep that 30 meters clean’ from such messages. Before the 2017 parade, HungUS.com arranged a workshop for painting placards and making balloon animals. While the balloons attracted some interest, no signs were made. When walking with HungUS.com in the Pride parade in 2015 and 2017, we could also confirm that nearly all placards and banners were pre-printed. One exception in 2015 was a sign that simply said ‘Love is the key’.

In contrast to the network of companies, the Budapest Pride organization’s aim with the 2015 parade was ‘to provoke and have a liberated, cordon-free march, which has been present for 20 years and now involves several thousand’. The need to provoke
should be understood in relation to prevalent anti-LGBTQ attitudes and legislation in Hungary (Renkin, 2015). The leading political party Fidesz changed the constitution in 2012 to define marriage as heterosexual, preventing the state from recognizing same-sex marriage (Korkut, 2012, p. 176). Politicians regularly resort to hate speech against LGBTQ people, such as the mayor of Budapest who in an interview on national TV in 2015 called the Pride parade ‘repulsive’. Over the last decade, activists of the far right have demonstrated against the parade, and LGBTQ people have repeatedly been subjected to threats and physical violence during and in conjunction with the parade. In interviews, employees also told us about repeated situations in which they had been screamed at and threatened by counter-demonstrators. Because of the counter-demonstrators, the whole parade is fenced off by the police, leaving an empty no-man’s-land of two blocks between the parade and the public. Following a group of counter-demonstrators outside the fenced-off area during the 2015 parade, we could confirm the aggressive approach, in which people shouted political messages and tried to break through the cordons. One man in the group carried a foam rubber mattress with a message echoing that of the Budapest mayor: ‘Your queerness is disgusting’.

For HungUS.com employees the Pride parade can be understood as a zone of indistinction where their personal and professional identities are blurred through the combined political manifestation and company event. For the activists the parade is, in contrast, a zone of indistinction in the negative sense, where hostile antagonists regard them as a mass of interchangeable homines sacri. In other words, two zones of indistinction momentarily intersect: a benevolent zone of indistinction of successful corporations, and the activists’ exposed zone of indistinction where the participants’ bios, their status as citizens, and their zoē, their physical safety, are put at immediate risk. HungUS.com employees blend in with these liminal beings and partake in a ‘we’ that is simultaneously included in and excluded from the politically charged and ‘provocative’ parade. HungUS.com’s participation in the Budapest Pride Parade thus follows a Möbius logic that exacerbates the passing between inclusion and exclusion, and order and disorder, at HungUS.com.

**The Roma settlement and biopoliticization**

Once a year since the founding of HungUS.com, the company engages in charity work by renovating buildings in impoverished neighbourhoods. They have returned to one place repeatedly: a community where the majority of the inhabitants are Roma – a so-called Roma settlement. When joining HungUS.com for the renovation project in 2015, we noticed the vast contrast between the surrounding suburban area and the neighbourhood of around 50 run-down houses, separated only by a small stream: piles of garbage, muddy roads, and dogs, goats and pigs walking around in the streets. The place brought to mind the zones of indistinction discussed by Agamben, and we will here consider the renovation project as taking place in the intersection between this ‘exposed’ zone of indistinction and the benevolent zone of indistinction of the company.

As in other places in Europe, the Hungarian Roma minority (estimates range from 200,000 to 1,000,000) has faced discrimination and prosecution for hundreds of years, and genocide during World War II. According to UNHCR statistics, at least 70% of Hungarian Roma are unemployed and their average life expectancy is around 10 years
less than the national average. Soviet anti-segregation programmes during the 1970s forced Roma to move to newly built, ethnically mixed suburban neighbourhoods. These houses were poorly built and fell into disrepair after the shift to a market economy and the succeeding deindustrialization in the early 1990s. In many of these neighbourhoods most of those who remained were Roma, which resulted in the emergence of today’s segregated settlements (Váradi & Virág, 2014). During the last years, paramilitary groups using racist rhetoric have been patrolling some rural towns with a large Roma population, and there have been several violent attacks in Roma settlements, some with lethal outcomes (Korkut, 2012, p. 18).

Similar to the situation during the Pride parade, HungUS.com employees enter a spatial demarcation during the renovation where they mix in joint efforts with people in a precarious situation. The intervention is not communicated to the mass media. Rather than a public relations strategy, managers and employees speak of the project as aiming inwards, empowering not only the people in the neighborhood, but also the employees. HungUS.com’s CEO suggested in an interview during the 2015 renovation that employees who otherwise spend most of their time by their computers get to feel that they make a tangible difference during one day. During the renovation, employees are encouraged by managers to spend time with the residents. The idea is that if the residents feel that others are paying attention to them, they will feel pride in their community and do their best to change it for the better. The effect is reciprocal: the project is an opportunity for employees to ‘learn to really appreciate what you have’, as one employee emphasizes. The engagement in the settlement can thus be seen as both an idealistic intervention and a teambuilding exercise, cultivating openness among employees. These two intentions are not mutually exclusive at HungUS.com, but reinforce one another.

Rather than a charity programme, the renovation is an integration project introducing a number of regulations in the settlement through the locals’ active participation. To get new windows and doors during the 2015 renovation, residents had to agree to have electric meters installed and to participate in 12 meetings where they learned about efficient energy use and made payment plans to reduce their debts to the electricity company. To receive running water in the house in 2017, participants took a class in cleaning and personal hygiene. Through these educational projects, life itself of the locals is mobilized, as the temperature in their houses, and the way they take care of their household economy as well as their body, become subject to biopolitical regulation (see further Dillon & Reid, 2001). The Director of Customer Care suggests that this is a more efficient way of creating change than letting the locals rely on a ‘daddy state’ that gives away ‘free stuff’. During the interventions, HungUS.com cooperates with an NGO specifically focused on supporting the people of the Roma settlement through, for example, mentoring, legal advice, computer workshops, and a training programme for children focusing on ‘emotional development’. Many residents have participated in these programmes, both the self-help meetings with the NGO and the renovation day, although, as one settlement resident participating in the programme pointed out during the 2015 renovation, ‘some [in the settlement] have a kind of mentality that stops them from participating in the meetings, to speak about the problems’.

If we join Fleming (2014b, p. 885) in regarding the biopoliticization of the workplace as ‘the instrumentalization of life attributes that were previously considered exogenous,
irrelevant or detrimental to formal organizational productivity’, the renovation project can
be seen as a biopolitical intervention for employees as well as residents. Participants are
addressed at the level of the body, or of zoē: they freeze together in the cold autumn air,
and at the end of the day they enjoy a warm meal together, exhausted after a day of hard
work. The biopolitical organization, according to Fleming (2014b), also employs workers’ ‘existential sense of self’. Through the encounter, individuals realize HungUS.com’s visions and act out personal convictions in a single instance. The residents are enrolled in
a similar process – they are called upon to turn their lives around by changing their ‘mind-
sets’. Rather than focusing on centuries of oppression and structural discrimination, the
renovations emphasize individual choices and situations, often with an instrumental pre-
occupation with quantities in line with a biopolitical rationality: the number of meetings
in which residents participate, the individual debt accumulated, and the amount of kilo-
watt-hours used.

Through the intervention, employees become the positive mirror image of the Roma
when both groups of participants are taught the same lesson – that change is ultimately
dependent on the efforts of individuals. Yet, while the renovation project aims to create
a common ‘we’, it is only meaningful as long as part of that ‘we’ simultaneously remains
socially and spatially excluded. Agamben has pointed out that contemporary humanitar-
ian organizations typically try to avoid politics and instead emphasize humanist, universalist values, with the consequence that they ‘can only grasp human life in the figure of
bare or sacred life’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 133). As a result, following Agamben, the funda-
mental distinction between ‘we’ who give and ‘they’ who receive support persists. In the
renovation project, there is a similar tension between, on the one hand, a humanitarian
bent for interventions to genuinely engage with people in need, and a biopolitical stance
toward the beneficiaries’ situation and achievements on the other. In this case, the hom-
ines sacri remain in their exposed zone of indistinction when employees return to busi-
ness as usual.

**Syrian refugees and dehierarchization**

While the two company interventions presented so far are almost as old as the company,
management encourages individuals to use the infrastructure of the organization to initi-
ate social missions. Like most acts of social engagement initiated and organized by
HungUS.com, these missions should not interfere with employees’ other work duties.
Management may expand on successful projects, still without having to commit to every
philanthropic impulse. One example of an employee-initiated engagement is the com-
pany’s support of Syrian refugees. With the Syrian refugees, as with the other two zones
discussed, the order of the organizational inside passes into a chaotic outside to yet again
pass into and reinforce the inside, but in this case, as we show, this intervention have
particular implications for the understanding of hierarchy in the company.

In 2016 a referendum was held regarding whether or not to accept the European Union’s
demands for Hungary to receive asylum-seekers, making asylum-seekers’ fundamental
human rights conditional. Before the vote, on Hungary’s National Day on 15 March, Prime
Minister Victor Orbán made a speech clearly drawing on an idea of a Hungarian ethnicity
(addressing ‘Hungarians around the World’), and intimating that the ‘invasion’ of
immigrants is a planned attempt by foreign powers to shape Hungary ‘in their own image’. This is leading up to a situation, according to Orbán, where ‘we find ourselves being told to pack up and leave our own land’. The speech was in line with a wider anti-immigration agenda and rhetoric (see Korkut, 2014). Fidesz’s national conservatism relies on a Möbius rhetoric of inside and outside: a Hungarian ethnic identity is constructed that defies national borders, while the threat from foreigners is both a threat from the outside and within Hungary. Refugees can be regarded as *hominès sacri* in today’s Hungary. Their life is turned bare by the repeated description by the media and politicians of refugees as a homogeneous mass of people, and treated as figures in European states’ refugee quota calculations, existing simultaneously included in and excluded from the state.

Support for refugees would thus be in line with HungUS.com’s other commitments. The manager of HungUS.com’s social engagement said in an interview in July 2015 that several employees had started to bring leftovers from the office canteen to refugees staying in provisional camps around the Keleti train station in Budapest. In several interviews conducted around the time, employees underlined the refugees’ precarious situation: adults and children sleeping outside on the hard paving, with no support from governmental agencies, not even food. However, management was careful at this point not to make the politically sensitive intervention seem like a company initiative. In autumn 2015, acts of help among employees for refugees grew within HungUS.com. One employee bought hundreds of blankets and handed them out. Others collected money at the office for food, medicine and sleeping bags that they brought to the station regularly. One employee also tells us how she brought pencils and papers to the station and brought her child to play with the other children there. One of HungUS.com’s co-founders noticed the growing engagement at the office. He was already concerned about the refugees’ situation, and promised that if employees collected money for an ambulance for a charity organization helping refugees, he would add one forint for every forint collected, to follow up on their initiative. In just a few days they were able to purchase an ambulance, which was also communicated to and picked up by Hungarian news media. This is thus an example of how personal engagement among employees can grow into an official company-wide intervention that strengthens the alternative entrepreneurship. An employee in a management position says: ‘[I]t was very self-exploratory for me to turn this personal engagement to a [HungUS.com] level of engagement and to start a movement and do it together with my team first and then extend it and do it together with a lot of other people.’

The familiar topology is repeated. The refugees are the *hominès sacri* enabling Möbius management: through the encounters initiated outside of work, the participants grow as human beings, but the accomplishment is simultaneously turned into a team effort, making it possible ‘to build the brand from the outside-in’ (Endrissat et al., 2017, p. 489). This move puts the hierarchal navigation out of order, and the personal and collective pass through one another, reproducing the company as a zone of indistinction. Mass media’s framing of the ambulance purchase as a company initiative in the final stages of the social mission contributes to a conflation of the employees’ grassroots initiative with that of management, and the employees’ personal fulfilment with the company’s values and aims.
Conclusions

By analysing three social interventions as ‘zones of indistinction’ in a case of alternative entrepreneurship, we have shown how employees pass between order and disorder, inclusion and exclusion, and personal convictions and professional responsibilities. The cultivation of ‘openness’ enables this process that we term Möbius management, through which employees are simultaneously offered to become ‘better persons, better humans’ and better equipped to create ‘a better product’, to echo the Communications Lead. The three interventions have different dynamics, each of them central to Möbius management. The Pride parade engagement creates a ‘we’ that is simultaneously included in and excluded from the politically charged parade, enabling a depoliticized embrace of the values of the parade. The renovation project shows the biopolitical aspects of the company’s engagement: through the inclusion of life itself in the organizational processes both employees and the target group of the project are subjected to a set of individualizing norms. Finally, the support to the refugees frames HungUS.com as a non-hierarchical organization. Möbius management thus ensures that a company can engage in social issues and at the same time decline to label itself as political, that it can speak to the individuals involved in the interventions as unique persons and human resources, and that it can be meticulously managed while creating a sense of equality that is characteristic of grassroots movements. Alternative entrepreneurship can in conclusion be regarded as a reconfiguration of ‘government and its economy’ that reinforces the inseparability of the two.

The different zones share a similar topology: employees’ personal engagement is encouraged through interventions in spatiotemporally demarcated zones, where life itself is exposed in a more direct manner than in the ‘comfort zone’ of the company’s offices. In these exposed zones, the value of life is challenged in various ways, and homines sacri are produced: LGBTQ people, Roma and refugees targeted by national-conservative rhetoric. Employees are momentarily immersed in the situation of these zones of indistinction while remaining an included exclusion: in the end, employees are there to ‘create a better future’ through promoting ‘openness’, not to change legislation or to initiate a political protest. Diken (2004, p. 101) points out with a reference to Castells (1996) that in contemporary societies, ‘[p]ower moves to the “space of flows”; politics, the agora, remains incessantly local’. In the present case, HungUS.com can expand in the global space of flows using ‘openness’ as a slogan, while remaining relatively independent of the local political context. As interviewees in management positions confirm, HungUS.com’s major market is outside of Hungary. However, the great contrast in rhetoric between the company and the ruling nationalist-conservative party in Hungary makes it possible to attract highly skilled employees with left-liberal values.

We have approached HungUS.com’s alternative entrepreneurial venture as a paradigmatic case helpful in understanding the role of ‘benevolent’ zones of indistinction in various forms of capitalist societies. Once hired, the employee enters a zone of indistinction where at any moment personal identities can pass into organizational identification and vice versa, and where no political positions, hierarchical statuses or identity categories need to stick with the person. On this threshold individuals are subjectified as morally accountable people, while their empathic engagement is turned into a resource. The result is a particular kind of human, who becomes a privileged mirror
image of the *homo sacer*, capable of passing from order into disorder, and back again. Some employees at HungUS.com seem to mistrust the ‘daddy state’ and have confidence in alternative entrepreneurship as the most viable option for social change – an approach institutionalized and reinforced through Möbius management. HungUS.com’s alternative entrepreneurship can thus be regarded as an intensified micro-level expression of the governmental machine’s increasing emphasis on, and naturalization of, the liberal market economy during modernity.

The ideal of ‘openness’ with its constant movement away from definite organizational identifications and categorizations at HungUS.com is reminiscent of Agamben’s (1993, p. 70) ideal ‘coming community’, a community ‘without presuppositions and without subjects’, a state of indeterminacy that he also refers to as ‘the open’ (Agamben, 2004). Such a community embraces the indistinctiveness of what it means to be human, instead of using this indistinctiveness to politicize *zoē*. However, HungUS.com’s ‘openness’ also leads to new closures. Employees are expected to ‘be open’ to remain a ‘cultural fit’ just as they are expected to maintain a certain level of productivity. The ultimate consequence of not being open and of not being productive is exclusion – to have one’s contract terminated. It is this movement between openings and closures that produces the lucrative ‘open’ employee. To paraphrase Alt (2011, p. 148), the ‘openness’ cultivated through Möbius management implies ‘an inclusion for those who accept its specific conception of being [an employee] but (inclusive) exclusion for those who refuse it’. In this article we have contributed to a ‘profanation’ of the theology of alternative entrepreneurship by bringing its ideals back to the daily play of inclusion and exclusion at HungUS.com. As such, this article is one step towards rethinking ‘government and its economy’, and enabling a separation of government from economy, anew.

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**Notes**

1. ‘We are not secondary citizens!’ (http://budapestpride.com/news/we-are-not-secondary-citizens).
2. ‘Inciting hatred is repulsive’ (http://budapestpride.com/news/budapest-pride-inciting-hatred-is-repulsive).
3. See ‘Hungary: Situation of Roma’ (www.refworld.org/docid/5036010888.html).
4. Speech given on 15 March 2016 (www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-15-march).
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