

Disasters and State of Exception: Tacloban, Yolanda, and the Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben¹

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Abstract

This paper applies and extends Giorgio Agamben's concept of state of exception—the suspension of Law that makes the Sovereign more powerful and exposes its citizens to greater harm—to the social and political condition that obtained after the supertyphoon Yolanda devastated Tacloban. It argues that the people of Tacloban were subjected to a state of exception that featured two phenomena: (1) the inability of the national government to respond immediately to the horrendous damage created by the supertyphoon, and (2) the sending of police and military forces to stop crime, looting, and robbery, and to impose peace and order in Tacloban. We argue that Agamben's political analysis is very apposite in bringing out the argument that the state of exception, normally an act by a sovereign government, could also result from its sheer ineptitude in carrying out rescue and relief operations in the aftermath of the devastation. In short, disaster analysis should be linked with the inability of the state to protect the welfare of the victims and survivors of disasters.

Introduction: The State of Exception

GIORGIO AGAMBEN IS AN ITALIAN contemporary philosopher well-versed in radical political philosophy and the philosophy of human rights. Born in Rome in 1942, he was educated at the University of