

Biopolitics: from Surplus Value to Surplus Life

Miguel Vatter

Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 304 pp., ISBN 978-0816649907

Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 208 pp., ISBN 978-295-98791-0

Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitik zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2007), 171 pp., ISBN 978-3-88506-635-4

Introduction

That power over the biological lives of individuals and peoples has become the greater part of political power, and, conversely, that control over one's biology is becoming a central focus for political action, can no longer be seriously questioned: biopolitics has become what Foucault once termed an "order of things," an episteme, a source of paradigms. Judging from the worldwide number of research networks that study the reality of biopolitics and biopower, the field of objects that Foucault uncovered more than 30 years ago is becoming ever more central in both the humanities and the social sciences.ⁱ Its status is similar to other fields of the social imaginary like the "free market economy" or "civil society": one can disagree about which statements are true and which false in relation to those realities, but one can no longer question their existence.ⁱⁱ Although it is unclear whether Foucault himself would have wanted to understand biopolitics in this way, the fact remains that biopolitics has crossed the epistemic threshold.ⁱⁱⁱ

The three books under review, which represent the state of the art in relation to current research on biopolitics, nonetheless exemplify distinct standpoints. Thomas Lemke offers a systematic overview of biopolitics as a discipline, which he defines, following Foucault, as the study of "what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life" (Foucault 1990: 143). Melinda Cooper's is a path-breaking study of the relation between biopolitics and neoliberal form of capitalism. She carries forth the task set by Foucault to "study liberalism as the general framework of biopolitics" ("étudier le libéralisme comme cadre général de la biopolitique") (Foucault 2004:24), by investigating the ways in which biological life, rather than labor power, becomes the source of surplus value. Roberto Esposito attempts to understand the emergence of biopolitics as an epochal turning point for philosophical reflection about politics. If politics in modernity is essentially about self-preservation through subjection to a legal order, then in our biopolitical age politics defends the biological lives of the "species," even against the juridical immunities of the self. Political philosophy, from this perspective, must rethink the possibility of community and individual freedom from within the horizon of biological life.

Although each of the three books adopts a different theoretical perspective on biopolitics (Lemke's is Foucaultian, Cooper's is post-Marxist, Esposito's is deconstructive), I argue that the authors share the premise that a condition of possibility for the emergence of biopolitics is the connection of biological life to the idea of surplus. In Foucault's *corpus* the idea of a "surplus of life" surfaces occasionally, for instance when he warns, immediately after defining biopolitics as a power-knowledge, that "it is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them" (Foucault 1990, 143). Likewise, the idea of surplus life appears in his last published text, when he defines the aim of the police as "the *permanently increasing production of something new*, which is supposed to *foster the citizens' life* and the state's strength. The police govern not by the law, but by a specific, a permanent and a positive intervention in the behaviour of individuals" (Foucault 2000, 415). In these two passages, the idea of surplus life covers two distinct senses of surplus: a negative one (analogous to "surplus value" in Marxist discourse) and an affirmative one (where life's excess is a source of resistance to power-knowledge). Each of these three books develops features of both senses of the idea of biopolitics as creation of surplus life.

Lemke: Biopolitics as an Order of Things

Thomas Lemke's *Biopolitik zur Einfuehrung* serves as one of the best introductions to the study of biopolitics available. Before Foucault appropriated the term and gave it a radically new meaning, "biopolitics" meant one of two things: the use of metaphysical or scientific conceptions of life as models for thinking about political organization, or the use of political means to safeguard the integrity of natural or human life from undue interference. Lemke shows why neither meaning captures the new reality that Foucault calls biopower. In both of these prior meanings, life and politics are understood as having an essence prior to their mutual interrelationship: in the former, life remains a stable, natural phenomenon which determines causally the possibilities of political organization; in the latter, it is a traditional concept of politics that is charged with taking up biological life as a new object of concern. After Foucault, biopolitics designates the inseparability of biological life and political life in late modernity, such that biological life ceases to be part of an unchangeable, natural presupposition of human politics, and, conversely, once politics becomes chiefly a matter of governing the living, the traditional categories under which it had been thought are shattered and must be renewed.

Lemke situates Foucault's approach to biopolitics within the project of a genealogy of forms of governmentality.^{iv} When seen in this context, biopolitics denotes the use of conceptions of normality derived from the human and natural sciences in order to construct politics as a normalizing power (48). This power to normalize appears in Foucault's *oeuvre* in relation to his critique of sovereign power and legal domination, in relation to the origin of modern racism, and in relation to liberalism as a new art of governmentality. What connects these three aspects of biopower is Foucault's claim "that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it" (Foucault 1990, 138). But Lemke's approach to the phenomenon of biopower diverges considerably from those of Agamben or Esposito as he declines to provide a logic or paradigm according to which decisions are taken with respect to what is made to live and what is let die.

Lemke's skepticism about the possibility of constructing a biopolitical philosophy seems to have three general motivations. The first is related to his belief that biopolitics designates a new field of social objectivity, which therefore needs to be studied empirically. From this perspective, it is an open question how disciplinary power, or modern racism, or the liberal management of biological life "foster life or disallow it." Secondly, Lemke seems to hold that every political philosophy of life presupposes a concept of life that functions as a ground for politics and, therefore, is to some degree immune from the intervention of political technologies. Such a presupposition contravenes Foucault's claim (on Lemke's reading) that the "naturalness" of biological life is but the shadow cast by technologies of biopower, much like the Marxist idea that economic "laws of nature" form the shadow cast by capitalist forms of production. A third ground for rejecting a biopolitical philosophy is that the concept of governmentality, under which he subsumes biopolitics, not only constructs individuals as "docile bodies" or specimens of "populations" but also intrinsically endows them with a subjectivity that gives them "rights" over their biological lives and grants them moral responsibility to manage it (66).^v Lemke believes that if one approaches biopolitics from the standpoint of a biopolitical philosophy one needs to downplay or abandon this moral-juridical aspect of governmentality and it no longer becomes possible to formulate questions like: "How do actual technologies model individuals as active and free citizens, as members of self-managing communities and organizations, as autonomously acting individuals who are in the condition to calculate their own life risks?" (67).

If Foucault's discussion of liberal governmentality points toward the necessity of a connection between biopolitics and the rule of law (with the associated ideas of juridical personality, individual responsibility, etc.), as Lemke argues, then it must also be acknowledged that Foucault himself never succeeds entirely in providing this connection. Lemke criticizes those reconstructions of biopolitics, such as those of Agamben and Negri, which seek the internal connection between law and biopolitics, because they call into question Foucault's basic distinction between sovereign power (legal domination) and biopower. As a result of this ambivalence with regard to the role played by law in the constitution of biopower, the link between the two is not explored in Lemke. His discussion of the variations on the Foucaultian problematic of biopolitics found in Agamben and in Negri/Hardt subsumes the problem of a biopolitics of law under what can be called a biopolitics of production, and a treatment of the political economy of biopolitics.^{vi}

Agamben exploits Foucault's gap between his conception of law and his idea of biopolitics. Lemke argues that he does so to bring biopower back into the fold of a logic or paradigm of sovereign power that accounts for why some forms of life are "made to live" and others are "disallowed" to the point of extermination. For Lemke, any such logic or paradigm misses a crucial point in Foucault's biopolitical

analyses: the problem with Agamben's collapse of biopower onto sovereign power is that it necessarily reduces biopolitics to a thanatopolitics. Agamben, says Lemke, is more interested in the logic of death as the limit of life than in the positive power that forms and transforms human biological life through its disciplining, normalization, securitization, conduct, etc. (79).^{vii} If the secret aim of all sovereignty is the production of *homini sacri* who can be killed without committing neither crime nor sacrifice, then such sovereign power "must be called unproductive, because 'bare life' is produced only to be repressed and killed.... Rather than exterminating 'bare life'... [biopolitics] subsumes 'bare life' under a 'bio-economical' imperative of increasing value [*Wertsteigerung*], which is aimed at a maximization of life-chances and the optimization of quality-of-life. In other words, Agamben fails to acknowledge that biopolitics is essentially a political economy of life" (80). For Lemke, biopolitics must contain within itself a necessary reference to the creation of a surplus of life, making it irreducible to thanatopolitics.

This essential connection between biopolitics and a "political economy of life" steers Lemke's discussion towards the thought of Negri and Hardt, explicitly picking up the question of the productivity of biopolitics. The analysis of "empire" in Negri and Hardt is an attempt to formulate a conception of biopolitics that mediates between political-juridical power ("sovereignty") and economical power ("production") by shifting attention to the generation of surplus value through "cognitive capitalism" and "immaterial labor" which exploit the knowledge, creativity, affects and language of human beings more than their bodily labor-power. Lemke also criticizes Negri's continued reliance on a Marxist base/superstructure dualism where biopower corresponds to the superstructural juridical power [*potere*] and biopolitics corresponds to the basis power [*potenza*] of the multitude to reproduce its species- or communal-being. Such dualisms are symptomatic of a slide away from a Foucaultian perspective on biopolitics towards a biopolitical philosophy. For the former perspective, in fact, "life" does not refer to an ontological substance, to an "original and transhistorical magnitude," as in Negri, but is a "social construct, an element of a historical know-how [*Wissenspraxis*]" (98). Calling into question the dualism of empire and multitude, regulation and free production, Lemke asks: "is not every production also always already a production that is regulated in a determined way?" (99)

Still, rather than pointing the way to an alternative analysis of the internal relation between life and law in biopolitics, one that would no longer be dependent on the Marxist basis-superstructure schema, Lemke instead calls for a more subtle and nuanced analysis of the "(biopolitical) relation of production," one that would no longer oppose in a binary way multitude to empire. What is missing, more precisely, is a sustained effort to see surplus life not as a result of a logic of (biopolitical) production but of the new relation between human law and biological life established by biopower.

The second half of *Biopolitik* dedicates one chapter to a discussion of the recent debates concerning how the paradigm of biopolitics has changed the traditional ways of thinking about politics. Lemke reviews the arguments of Heller, Giddens, and Fassin as to why bodily integrity or biological identity can give rise to a new understanding of citizenship and of legitimacy, followed by a chapter dedicated to a discussion of the change in the concept of life from "organic substratum to molecular software" (119) in the most recent biosciences, and how this feeds into the project of a political re-invention of nature, thus undoing from the side of politics the distinction between life and politics. In this context Lemke discusses the work of Haraway, Rabinow, and Rose, among others. Lemke views these efforts as a renewal of a "vital politics"^{viii} pioneered by neoliberal thinkers like Röpke and Rüstow, and which is responsible for dubious concepts like "human economy" and "human capital." At stake in these neologisms is the attempt to limit the capitalist imperative to accumulation of capital in the name of a more "humane" quality of life, and ultimately in the name of a politics and an economics of plural lifestyles (as proposed by Rose). Lemke, in a less Simmelian and more Marxist vein, suggests that these concepts are symptomatic of the turn from an industrial economy to a bioeconomy in which surplus value is directly extracted from human and non-human biological life rather than from labor power. Like Rose's own book, Lemke ends with references to the ideas of a bioeconomy and biocapital, also the subjects of Melinda Cooper's work.

Cooper: Biopolitics as Surplus Creation of Life

Melinda Cooper's *Life as Surplus. Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* brilliantly carries out Lemke's desideratum that "the analysis of biopolitics not be separated from a critique of political economy of life" (146). As Lemke points out, the vast majority of contemporary works dedicated to biopolitics separate the politicization of life from its economization.^{ix} Cooper's book bucks this trend as it attempts to show how the connection between life and surplus, to which I alluded at the start as being

fundamental for biopolitics, in fact owes its reason to the political economy of biological life in neoliberal forms of capitalism.

Cooper's book treats the relation between biological (re)production and capital accumulation in the United States during the last thirty years. Her analysis takes off from two themes found in Foucault's work. The first, in *The Order of Things*, is that biology and political economy develop in parallel because (once value is rooted in labor force, as with Ricardo and Marx) then value also is rooted in the sphere of biological life and its reproduction, since the latter is presupposed by labor force. The second theme emerges from Foucault's later hypothesis that liberalism should be understood as the framework within which biopower develops. Cooper's investigations bring together and radicalize the implications of these two themes: on her account, neoliberal economics attempts to "efface the boundaries between the spheres of production and reproduction, labor and life, the market and living tissues" (9).

The main thesis of *Life as Surplus* is that "neoliberalism and the biotech industry share a common ambition to overcome the ecological and economical limits to growth associated with the end of industrial production, through a speculative reinvention of the future" (11). The neoliberal development of capitalism, starting in the decade of the 70s, targeted biological life as the novel source of extraction of surplus value. In this sense, the neoliberal economy is essentially a bioeconomy. This is the first sense in which Cooper speaks of "life as surplus." Adopting a Marxist notion of social contradictions, she also argues that every attempt of capital to overcome limits to its own expansion ends up creating other limits or contradictions. In the case of the bioeconomy, the extraction of surplus value from biological life requires that life be manipulated, controlled, and ultimately pushed beyond its "natural" limits so to generate an excess or surplus of biological life. Examples range from microbial life that thrives in extreme conditions, to new immunitary devices and self-assembling artificial life forms, to technologies of in-vitro fertilization and embryonic stem cell lines. Cooper's thesis is that all this creation of biological life in excess of its limits is paid at the price of a deepening devaluation of human lives: the second main sense in which life functions as surplus. The third dimension also has a Marxist inspiration. Just as, for Marx, social contradictions express themselves symptomatically in religious beliefs, so too for Cooper the creation of life "beyond the limits of nature" in contemporary bioscience is strictly correlated to a shift in the global political economy toward financial or speculative capital. Today's "debt-form" relies on faith in the other-worldly understood as faith in the promise of an after-life in this life, a life beyond the limits of human biographical lives. The Evangelical Right and its cults of the unborn and the born-again represent one religious symptom of this fundamental change in the economic basis.

In the first half of her book, Cooper examines the different aspects of the shift in capitalism from labor to biological life as source of surplus, i.e., she offers a reconstruction of the idea of a bioeconomy. In the second half, she turns to "life science politics" and its religious underpinnings. The discussion of these three senses of "life as surplus" is extremely rich, but three of Cooper's examples identify some unresolved problems with her thesis.

According to Cooper, the idea of a bioeconomy first emerges in the early 1970s with the awareness that the limitless expansion of Fordist, industrial production was putting at risk the continued reproduction of life on earth. Biotechnology seemed to solve this issue, as it could "relocate economic production at the genetic, microbial and cellular level so that life becomes, literally, annexed within capitalist processes of accumulation" (19). This "annexation" of biological life to the creation of surplus, of capital, has two aspects. According to the first, which corresponds to the first sense of "life as surplus," biological production is transformed "into a means for creating surplus value" (22). How this occurs remains strangely underdetermined; Cooper is never really clear about how biological life, as opposed to labor power, can said to be "exploited" in such a way as to immediately generate capital or surplus value.

One possible account of how the production of life is immediately responsible for the extraction of surplus value is given by the second sense of "life as surplus," namely, by the idea that biological life is made to do or be "more" than what is "naturally" feasible for it by turning biological life into something that can generate itself out of itself. In a metaphorical sense, then, one could say that biological life is being "exploited" by bioscience and biotech, but the product of this exploitation is not directly surplus value; rather, it is surplus life. The connection from surplus life to surplus value depends centrally on an analogy that Marx draws between financial capital and the reproduction of life: "For Marx, the creation of money from debt represents the most insane form of the capitalist delirium... capital begins to imagine itself as self-valorizing value: a life-force possessed of its own powers of self-regeneration" (30). In other words, capital targets biological life as a new source of surplus because capital is moved by its own

internal dynamic: “the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary [Grenze] is and has to be a barrier [Schranke] for capital.” (31) Once the geological reserves for industrial production have been exhausted, capital seeks in the biological resources of autopoietic life a new source for reproducing debt. The biological expansion of the limits of life in regard to its production and reproduction feeds an analogous expansion of the debt form beyond all “natural” limits. This excess of financial capital in turn spills over into the “real” economy and propels limitless economic growth. On this hypothesis, a bioeconomy does not simply mean that biological life becomes a new commodity; it also means that *capital accumulation itself acquires “biological” features*. The reproduction of capital is essentially tied to the possibility that biological life reproduce itself in an unlimited way: the neoliberal promise of economic growth without limits is predicated on what Cooper calls a “biology without limits” (32).

The very concept of a bioeconomy, therefore, turns on the possibility of the second sense of “life as surplus,” namely, on the idea that “life is intrinsically expansive. Its law of evolution is one of increasing complexity rather than entropic decline, and its specific creativity is autopoietic rather than adaptive” (35). Cooper shows how the biotech industry, the hegemony of financial capital over the economy based on the application of theories of a self-organizing economy (derived from Schumpeter’s and Hayek’s adoption of biological growth models), and the new theories of a “political economy of nature” based on theories of complexity (as in Prirogine’s work and the Gaia hypothesis) all interweave and mutually reinforce each other.

Still, the back and forth between the creation of surplus value and the creation of biological life as surplus remains at the level of Foucault’s initial analogy between the growth of political economy and biology as power-knowledge dispositifs. For instance, Cooper does not show the specific path from a complexity theory of biological life as infinitely expansive and self-reproductive to the claim that biological life is being exploited in order to generate directly surplus value. Similarly, if Hayek, Schumpeter and other economists apply biological models of growth to represent the movements and the fluctuations of commodities in an economy, one cannot conclude from this to the claim that the “real” economy no longer functions on the basis of the exploitation of labor power. What I find missing in Cooper’s rich book is a demonstration that biocapitalism is really based on a *shift* in the object of exploitation, from labor to biological life, and, concurrently, a theoretical account of what the term “exploitation” could possibly mean in relation to the creation of surplus biological life.

If I understand Cooper’s point correctly, the link between the two senses of “life as surplus” (let’s call them the “economical” and the “biological” senses of surplus creation) is entirely a speculative matter: that surplus life translates into surplus value is an idealization, a question of promissory faith, and not an actual fact. One can understand the sense of the surplus life as a promise and a faith in two ways. Considered as a promise which may never be actually realized, the “exploitation” of biological life in order to generate surplus value is credible enough to fuel the financial speculation that maintains the financial markets operating (until the next crisis and the next influx of cash through debt). Cooper herself remains ambivalent with regard to the “promise” of a biotech generated surplus life: is the creation of surplus biological life subject to the same limits and contradictions as the production of surplus value, or does the discourse of “natural limits” applies to capitalism but not, paradoxically, to biological life? Cooper writes that “as long as life science production is subject to the imperatives of capitalist accumulation, the promise of a surplus of life will be predicated on a corresponding move to devalue life” (45). This sounds as if life as surplus has an emancipatory potential to turn “waste into surplus,” but only once it is liberated from the shackles imposed by the imperative to maximize profits. If so, then Cooper appears close to Negri’s biopolitical paradigm, according to which the logic of biological life is ultimately expansive, radically affirmative and radically immanent, and as a result anti-capitalist. In this conception, when capitalism attempts to annex biological life for its purposes, it only deepens its own contradictions.

But the idea that surplus value can be extracted from the limitless creation of a surplus of biological life is also the object of a religious faith, the subject of the book’s second half. The object of this new faith is what one could call a biological, immanent sense of the “after-life.” For that reason, Cooper centers her investigation on the “emerging sciences of regenerative medicine” related to the life sciences of embryology, developmental biology, oncology and reproductive medicine. Regenerative medicine combines stem cell science with tissue engineering with the aim of therapeutic cloning of organs and the like. To employ a pun, one can say that regenerative medicine, as Cooper reconstructs its ideology, literally has the task of giving body to the third sense of “life as surplus,” associated to the idea of a

promise of the after-life: “Life, as mobilized by regenerative medicine, is always in surplus of itself... What regenerative medicine wants to elicit is the generative moment from which all possible forms can be regenerated – the moment of emergence” (127). To this moment of emergence there corresponds the temporality of the instant as described in Deleuze: “the instant... is about to be born and already born again” (127). The sense of a surplus of biological life here is to be understood as the promise of an after-life in one’s own lifetime: hence the crucial role played by the twin concepts of the un-born and the born-again for the destiny of one’s earthly life in the religious consciousness of the United States’ Evangelical Right.

Cooper first parses the concept of the born-again in a dense analysis of the logic (or ideology) of stem cell science. She believes that stem cell research is intended to counteract the classic theory of generation by which cell growth occurs through division and differentiation, which ultimately leads to the death of the organism. According to this classic theory, “death is the price we are obliged to pay for our organization” (137). Cancerous cells, on this account, are cells that overgrow, that do not respect death as a natural limit of growth. With cancer there occurs an “overproduction of life... If cancer kills, it is... as an extortion of the vital life force of organic life (cellular division) which it deflects from all ends” (137). The overproduction of life by cancerous cells offers yet another sense of life as surplus: “the cancerous growth refuses to submit to the limits of generational time and death and instead pursues its own relentless self-accumulation” (139). Embryonic stem cells “seem to behave quasi-cancerously.... Stem cell science seems to suggest that the quasi-cancerous properties of ES cell line are in fact enormously productive” (137). The surplus of life promises the extraction of surplus capital by exploiting the properties of embryonic stem cells, by harvesting their “quasi-cancerous” overproductivity: “what stem cell science seeks to produce is not the potential organism – but rather *biological promise* itself, in a state of nascent transformability” (140). Naturally, Cooper is careful to say that the analogy between stem cell lines and cancerous growth does not mean that surplus capital generated through speculative biotech is like cancerous growth, but one is nonetheless left with the impression that the promise of life as surplus contained in stem cell research only becomes “cancerous” when it is submitted to the imperatives of capital accumulation and turned into the basis of speculative value.

Cooper ends the book by bringing together the idea of debt imperialism with the rise of pro-life movements. She poses the question: “How will the gift of capital, which emanates from the U.S. Treasury, be forced to repatriate within the confines of America the nation?” (167). Her claim is that the Evangelical Right answered to this dilemma by reasserting “actual limits” on the speculative nature of the biological after-life: the promise of the after-life is realized, and limited to, the un-born, whose right to life, therefore, is tantamount to the survival of the United States as a nation. “The unborn, after all, is the future American nation in its promissory form, the creative power of debt recontained within a sexual politics of familial life” (168). In other words, religious fundamentalism figures the “struggle to reimpose the property form in and over the uncertain future. This property form, as the right-to-life movement makes clear, is inextricably economic and sexual, productive and reproductive. It is ultimately a claim over the bodies of women” (171). Once again, the emancipatory force of the promise in a biological, immanent after-life tied to embryonic research is transformed in the ideological form of a fundamentalist limitation of reproductive forces and liberties, very much in the same way that capitalist forms of production limit and eventually enter into contradiction with the (inherently emancipatory) development of productive forces. Starting off from biopolitics, passing through bioeconomics, Cooper ultimately reinscribes a Marxist-feminist discourse of sexual politics. The affirmative sex-bio-politics that Cooper would develop to resist the sexual politics of the Evangelical “culture of life” remains unspecified. Is the only way to surpass the “repressive” limits imposed on biocapitalism by fundamentalism and evangelicalism for biological reproduction to be returned back into the hands and under the supervision of the “workers” (i.e., women) so that the “natural limits” of their bodies be respected in the process of reproduction? The biopolitics of natality, the promise of the unborn and the faith in the possibility of rebirth in this life, interestingly enough, also form the backbone of Roberto Esposito’s theoretical proposal to think an affirmative biopolitics.

Esposito: Biopolitics as a Political Philosophy of Life

Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy is the first work by Roberto Esposito, along with Antonio Negri and Giorgio Agamben one of the most prolific and important exponents of contemporary Italian political theory, to be translated into English.^x *Bios* puts forward a suggestive political philosophy of life, or what Esposito calls a “biophilosophy”. Esposito’s paradigm of “immunization” accounts for the logic and functioning of *dispositifs* of biopower that work by “flattening the political into the purely biological” and that politicize the biological as much as biologize the political (146-7). Esposito’s work rivals Agamben’s theory of the exception as found in *Homo Sacer*. While both depart from the Lemke’s methodological precautions against constructing a political philosophy of life on the basis of the empirical reality of biopolitics, Esposito exceeds Agamben’s biopolitical philosophy. *Bios* not only develops a paradigm for the power over life, but also argues for an “affirmative” biopolitics, a conception based on what the “normative power” of biological life itself. Esposito’s biophilosophy cannot be charged with avoiding the “productive” side of biopower, nor can it be charged with underplaying the importance of juridical and ethical norms in biopolitical forms of governmentality. In fact, Esposito’s idea of a “norm of life” overlaps with the concepts of ethopolitics and biolegitimacy developed by Rose and Fassin, yet at the same time diverging radically from them by presupposing the crisis and deconstruction of their categories of political thought. Because Esposito’s “philosophy of *bios*” intends to offer the ground for an affirmative biopolitics, his theory rivals Negri’s expansive and positive understanding of biopolitics, but rather than operating on a post-Marxist sense of life as surplus (as Cooper does), Esposito adopts Nietzschean and Spinozist motifs in order to think the idea of surplus life.

Since the 1980s Esposito has deconstructed political modernity through the history of modern political ideas. His *Categorie dell’impolitico* analysed the exhaustion of the political in modernity and the relation between individual and community. He pursued this project in *Communitas* (1998) and *Immunitas* (2002), which develop the thesis that the modern subject, with all of its civil and political rights, emerges as an attempt to attain immunity from the contagion of what is extra-individual; namely, the possibility of radical community. This attempt to immunize the individual from the common ends up annihilating the individual in a kind of auto-immune reaction. *Bios* stands as the third and last part of Esposito’s trilogy dedicated to exploring the “biopolitics of immunity.”

The main thesis of the trilogy is deceptively simple yet profound. The original meanings of the term “community” derive from the Latin root *munus*, which means an obligation to give of oneself to others. There is no community between individuals without this gift or expenditure. At the same time, the obligation to give of oneself represents a terrible risk and burden, because the structure of the gift is inherently asymmetrical: it can in no way be reciprocated and the community demands ever more gifts from its members.

While *Communitas* seeks to identify this risk, *Immunitas* describes the result: the “paradigm of immunization,” which structures the whole of political thought in modernity. Given the risk posed by the community to the individuals who belong to it, the members of the community need to protect themselves from the demands made by their common life, by their community, of which they are themselves an essential part. This self-defense takes the form of a politico-juridical *immunitas*, an immunity that the individual takes against the demand and the duty that the community places upon him or her. Immunity from the demands of the other as other takes different shapes and forms in modern political thought, but the main ones consist in: 1) the idea of subjective rights against the sovereign power, 2) the idea of private property and of money as universal equivalent, and 3) the idea of sufficient reason. *Immunitas* shares the root of *communitas*, but it means the negation of the logic of the gift, and instead the inauguration of another logic of social existence which turns on fair exchange and contract.

Thus, the second part of Esposito’s trilogy is a detailed study of the different mechanisms, all of them juridical-political mechanisms, through which the life of the individual is protected from its common life. One clearly sees, even in this simple formulation, the ambivalence and the dialectical movement implicit in the very idea of immunity. First, the protection of individual life against the community is the task of politics itself, that is, of the community. Second, this immunitary politics must be, at its heart, anti-political and anti-communitarian.^{xi} Thus, on Esposito’s account, modernity develops a conception of politics that in reality is nothing short of a continuous attack on the possibility of politics itself. Immunitary politics takes on an auto-immunitary form.

In over-protecting the lives of individuals from the life of the community, modern politics isolates this individual life to the point that it ceases to be a human life. Instead, the human being is reduced to a species-life which then becomes the object of biopower. With *Bios*, the third part of the trilogy, Esposito connects his account of immunization with Foucault's idea of biopolitics. Why does a modern politics based on the protection of life turn, with dramatic speed, into the genocidal politics characteristic of 20th century state racism, eugenics, and genocide? What steps led modern Western political thought, centered on the absolute value of individual life, to generate a politics of death, a thanatopolitics, in which politics is essentially about life-and-death decisions, namely, about the decision as to what part of the human species-life can be selected and exterminated in order for another part to live on?

Esposito begins with a long and careful discussion of Foucault's understanding of biopolitics, finding it lacking on two points. Not unlike Lemke, Esposito also finds that in Foucault the veritable relationship between life and law still remains enigmatic. One is never sure in Foucault if biopolitics, as part of the evolution of governmentality in the West, is perhaps the last mask of sovereign power, or whether it effects a radical break with all logics of sovereignty. Additionally, since Foucault does not himself provide a logic of biopolitics (as Agamben does), there remains a structural ambivalence on his part with respect to biopolitics: understood as the exercise of political power over life which leads to a politics of death, to modern racism and totalitarianism, biopolitics is to be rejected; but understood as a new kind of power that develops out of life itself, biopolitics is to be considered positive, containing the promise of a new politics. *Bios* is an attempt to resolve both the enigma of and the ambivalence toward biopolitics by explaining clearly how and why biopolitics turns out to be a politics of death, and how it could be articulated differently in order to bring about a new (emancipatory) political philosophy of life.

The internal, logical relation that connects life to politics corresponds, for Esposito, to a "paradigm of immunization": "Rather than being superimposed or juxtaposed in an external form that subjects one to the domination of the other, in the immunitary paradigm, *bios* and *nomos*, life and politics, emerge as two constituent elements of a single, indivisible whole that assumes meaning from their interrelation." (45) Modern biopolitics emerges as an auto-immune reaction to the immunizing strategies set up by the main tradition of modern political thought, where, from Hobbes onwards, the protection of life is seen to be the central imperative of politics. Through a series of tight and elegant reconstructions of the thought of Hobbes, Locke and the idea of negative liberty in modern liberalism, Esposito argues that such a tradition sets the bases of political order (under the names of sovereignty, property, and liberty) as a function of the preservation of life, but that such an attempt to mediate life and politics through categories of juridical order necessarily leads to negative outcomes – essentially, the alienation of the individual from every commonality with others – that end up threatening the individual's life more than ever before. The rise of biopolitics in modernity is thus understood as an attempt to immunize the individual from its liberal immunities, setting off massive auto-immunitary reactions. Biopolitics is not foreign to the history of modern political thought, or to liberalism in particular, but is the consequent radicalization of its immunitary drive. Esposito considers the main tradition of modern political thought as now completely useless when it comes to understanding modern biopolitics and when articulating a political response to it.

For Esposito, the missing link between the modern tradition of political thought initiated by Hobbes (based on the protection of individual life) and the genocidal biopolitics of totalitarian regimes emerges from Nietzsche's political thought. Discussing Nietzsche as a central figure of biopolitics marks a welcome addition to the literature, which to date has found its main theoretical referents either in the Spinoza-Marx counter-tradition of modernity proposed by Negri and Hardt, or in the deconstruction of modernity centered on the Heidegger-Benjamin relationship, as in the works of Agamben and Derrida. Esposito develops the claim that Nietzsche is the thinker in modernity who ends the project of protecting life through the legal-political order and, instead, advocates thinking of politics and law as a function of the affirmation of the (will to) power inherent to animal life (81). From Nietzsche's perspective, modern institutions which seek to "protect" the lives of individuals in fact are responsible for weakening the animality of human beings and the "originary politicity of life," the "unending form of struggle" that characterizes such animality (82-85).

Now, Esposito argues that Nietzsche's call for life to "defend" itself from the over-protectiveness of modern civilization leads him to advocate that life expose itself to danger and death as a way to affirm itself. The crucial claim, on which Esposito's argument rests, is that Nietzsche abandons self-preservation as the proper logic of biological life. Rather, for Nietzsche life needs to "continually move beyond and transgress" every limit and protection that is given to it: life is "its own overcoming." Biological life is

“something that is both more than life and other than life” (88). This claim grounds Esposito’s project to uncover the root of thanatopolitics as well as to uncover the possibilities of an affirmative biopolitics. Both outcomes depend on the idea that life generates a surplus or excess of itself. Surplus life is figured by the Dionysian character of life which, at the moment of its highest affirmation opens itself to its other and goes “under,” turning into a death drive. From the Dionysian perspective, all of Western political thought appears as a gigantic defensive, immunitary dispositif – and, thus, from Nietzsche’s perspective, it also appears as a long procession of “decadent” types and life-denying moralities. The basic drive of modernity to “protect life” turns out to be “deadly” for life conceived as will to power.

If protecting life is in the end death-producing, then the affirmation of life must require the non-protection of life, the cultivation of the death drive. Biopolitics turns into a thanatopolitics, a politics of giving death in order to keep alive (94). Esposito calls this Nietzsche’s “hyperimmunitary” reaction to modern logics of immunity, and he believes Nazism is the perfect embodiment of this reaction at a national level (96). What keeps Esposito’s reading of Nietzsche from falling prey to vulgar readings of “Nietzsche as proto-fascist ideologue” is that the surplus and excess of life holds the only remedy against the hyper-immunitary or auto-immunitary reaction of totalitarianism. Dionysian life betrays a kind of conflict and disorder that is in the end unmasterable by political organizations, and out of which an anti-totalitarian, positive conception of politics can develop. Such a non-immunitary approach to life passes through what Esposito calls, but does not develop, “the animalization of man” in Nietzsche.^{xii} The last two chapters explore both sides of the biopolitical dilemma that Nietzsche’s thought discloses: on the one hand, the hyper-immunitary “principle that life defends itself and develops only through the progressive enlargement of the circle of death” (110); on the other hand, the anti-immunitary project of developing an affirmative biopolitics which is centered on the “animalization” of man.

Nazi biopolitics, on Esposito’s reading, takes the first fork. For Esposito, Foucault and Agamben wrongly blame sovereignty for the sudden transformation of biopolitics into thanatopolitics. Esposito believes that his immunity paradigm offers a more convincing account. To show this, he follows in detail the ways in which Nazi ideology constructs the category of a “degenerate” life that needs to be “exterminated” in order to “cure” the life of the German *Volk* (117ff). Death can be seen as a “cure” in eugenic and genocidal discourses because they presuppose that the life which is to be killed in reality is but a “life inhabited by death... simply flesh, an existence without life... *Dasein ohne Leben*” (134). Therefore, putting such a life to death is an effort to put death to death, “freeing” the already dying life from its torment, a “mercy killing”: “The disease against which the Nazis fight to the death is none other than death itself. What they want to kill in the Jew and in all human types like them isn’t life, but the presence in life of death: a life that is already dead because it is marked hereditarily by an original and irremediable deformation; the contagion of the German people by a part of life inhabited and oppressed by death... In this case, death became both the object and the instrument of the cure, the sickness and its remedy” (138).

Esposito’s affirmative biopolitics turns on the “deconstruction” of the dispositifs of Nazi thanatopolitics which attempt to “cure” life of death. All of these dispositifs identify a kind of “life not worthy of being lived,” a “lifeless existence” that needs to be selected and exterminated for the sake of the health of the individual and political body. The principle of selection of “degenerate” life is always the claim that some human form of life is lacking in one or another “spiritual” component, and this turns that form of life into something merely “biological,” a rest-of-life that can be eliminated. Esposito’s deconstruction of Nazi biopolitics follows the inverse route: the goal is “to interpret life’s relationship with politics philosophically” where Nazi biopolitics thinks the relation between life and politics only “biologically” (150). The real political task of philosophy, what turns political philosophy into a biopolitical philosophy, is the seemingly paradoxical demonstration that life as *bios* is irreducible to biology, that existence and spirit (*zoe* and *bios* in Agamben’s terms) can never be separated and opposed to each other.

Esposito employs the concept of “flesh” to argue for the irreducibility of *bios*-logical life to biology. If in Nazi biopolitics “an ‘existence without life’ is considered to be all that does not have the racial qualifications necessary to integrate ethnically the individual body with that of the collective,” then Esposito suggests that this existence should be understood as “flesh that does not coincide with the body; it is that part or zone of the body, the body’s membrane, that isn’t one with the body, that exceeds its boundaries or is subtracted from the body’s enclosing” (159). The reduction of life to biology is equivalent to the reduction of the flesh to the body. Through this conception of the distinction between flesh and body Esposito tries to work out a conception of life that is inherently exposed to the world and to others, and thus which cannot be the object of preservation or of immunization of the self, as happens when life is reduced to the body and its self-enclosure. On the contrary, the flesh is what always already

opens the self onto others, and thus corresponds to the *munus*, to the expenditure of self that establishes community with an other. For Esposito, a biopolitics of the flesh would counter the corporatist construction of the political community: “Perhaps the moment has arrived to rethink in nontheological terms the event that is always evoked (but never defined in better fashion) that two thousand years ago appeared under the enigmatic title ‘the resurrection of the flesh.’ To ‘rise again,’ today, cannot be the body inhabited by the spirit, but the flesh as such: a being that is both singular and communal, generic and specific, and undifferentiated and different, not only devoid of spirit, but a flesh that doesn’t even have a body” (167). An interesting point of contact between Esposito and Cooper: both signal the point at which biopolitics touches on political theology. Analogously to Cooper’s attempt to take away from Christian fundamentalism the discourse of an “after-life” by giving it a radically immanent meaning, so too for Esposito “the notion of flesh needs to be rethought outside of Christian language, namely, as the biopolitical possibility of the ontological and technological transmutation of the human body. One could say that biotechnology is a non-Christian form of incarnation” (168).

Nazi biopolitics also fought against death in life by targeting natality (for, as Arendt and Heidegger both pointed out, life has two closely interconnected limits: mortality and natality).^{xiii} Consequently, Esposito seeks to deconstruct the eugenic drive to “suppress birth” by forced sterilizations and other mechanisms. This drive obeys the imperative to establish community strictly along “fraternal” lines that exclude all traces of foreignness: “fraternity essentially refers to the fatherland; it confirms the biological bond that joins in a direct and masculine lineage the brother to the father” (173). Affirmative biopolitics needs to be a politics based on birth which “rather than enclosing the extraneousness within the same biological or political body (and so canceling it)... overturns what is within the maternal womb outside. It doesn’t incorporate, but excorporates, exteriorizes, and bends outside.... It cannot be used... as protective apparatus for the self-preservation of life. At the moment in which the umbilical cord is cut and the newborn cleaned of amniotic fluid, he or she is situated in an irreducible difference with respect to all those who have come before. With regard to them, he or she emerges as necessarily extraneous and also foreign” (176). Like the flesh, this understanding of natality functions as the “*munus* that opens [the identity of individual and collective subjects] to that in which it does not recognize itself.” (176.) Following Gilbert Simondon (also an important referent for Cooper), Esposito argues that “to live is to perpetuate a birth that is permanent and relative.” What distinguishes human life from animal life is not the presence of a “spiritual” surplus, but rather the surplus of births because a human life (*bios*) is a process of being continually re-born (181). “The only way for life to defer death isn’t to preserve it as such (perhaps in the immunitary form of negative protection) but rather to be reborn continually in different guises” (ibid). Much as for Cooper, for Esposito an affirmative biopolitics passes through the reappropriation, in a non-Christian sense, of the twin motifs of the unborn and of the born-again.

The last category of Nazi biopolitics that stands in need of deconstruction is the idea that there exists a “norm” of biological life that is external to such life and that allows to distinguish a “degenerate” from a “superior” *ghenos* or race. In his deconstruction of the idea of a “norm of life” Esposito turns back to Spinoza’s theory of natural right. He is interested in the idea of natural right understood as a norm which is an “immanent rule that life gives itself in order to reach the maximum point of its expansion” (186). Esposito presents Canguilhem as the contemporary philosopher who pursued furthest the Spinozist attempt “to think life philosophically, to make life the pertinent horizon of philosophy” (189). The key here is not to reduce life “to a simple material” but recover its “subjective character”: the normative power immanent to biological life.

Thus, at the end of his work, Esposito returns to the looming problem with which I began this review, *viz.*, how to provide an account of the relation between biopolitics and the rule of law without collapsing biopolitics into a thanatopolitics, without denying the phenomenon of surplus life. Esposito’s answer turns on recovering Canguilhem’s idea of an “organism’s norm of life.” This idea of the norm remains immanent to biological life, yet is not reducible to the distinction between the normal and the pathological, because biological life has the additional capacity to determine what counts as a norm for itself. In relation to this biological normative spontaneity, to be “normal” means to “preserve intact his or her own normative power, which is to say the capacity to create continually new norms” (191). Life’s surplus, on this account, are its norms.^{xiv}

But in the end the relation between biological norm and juridical norm remains underspecified in Esposito. On the one hand, he appears to advocate that biological normativity replace or, at least, displace the centrality of juridical normativity because the latter is hopelessly entangled with the modern immunitary politics whose crisis he stages in *Bios*. The concluding discussion of Deleuze’s late concept

of an “impersonal” yet singular life that is no longer the property of an individual, and in that sense is generic or common, while at the same time being unlike the lives of all others, and thus radically singular indicates Esposito’s belief that the inherently juridical conception of the “person” cannot be the basis for a new sense of post-immunitary community.^{xv} At the same time, he suggests that the juridical norm be granted “the power [*potenza*] of life’s becoming” so that it may live up to the principle that “no part of life can be destroyed in favor of another: every life is a form of life and every form refers to life” (194). This principle seems to bring Esposito closer to one form of modern political immunity, namely, the Spinozist idea of radical toleration, except that what is to be tolerated is no longer the private-property holder but rather the radically singularized forms of life of an impersonal life. For their part, the political traditions of modernity that have survived modernity’s auto-immunitary crisis, namely, political liberalism and republicanism, have yet to take seriously the significance and consequences of the emergence of biopolitics. These books are an open invitation addressed to these currents of political thought to enter into the discussion.

References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2008. *Signatura Rerum. Sul metodo*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Esposito, Roberto. 2007. *Terza persona. Politica della vita e filosofia dell'impersonale*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. Translated by R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 2000. *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*. Edited by J. Faubion. Vol. 3. New York: The New Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2001. *L'herméneutique du sujet. Cours au Collège de France. 1981-1982*. Paris: Gallimard Seuil.
- Foucault, Michel. 2004. *Naissance de la biopolitique*. Paris: Gallimard Seuil.
- Galzigna, Mario, ed. 2008. *Foucault oggi*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Lemke, Thomas. 1997. *Eine Kritik der politischen Vernunft. Foucaults Analyse der modernen Gouvernementalität*. Hamburg: Argument Verlag.
- Lemke, Thomas. 2007. *Gouvernementalität und Biopolitik*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag fuer Sozialwissenschaften.
- Lemm, Vanessa. 2009. *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy. Culture, Politics and the Animality of the Human Being*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Marinas, José-Miguel. 2006. *El síntoma comunitario: entre polis y mercado*. Madrid: A. Machado Libros.
- Muhle, Maria. 2008. *Eine Genealogie der Biopolitik. Zum Begriff des Lebens bei Foucault und Canguilhem*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Purtschert, Patricia and Meyer, Katrin and Winter, Yves, ed. 2008. *Gouvernementalität und Sicherheit. Zeitdiagnostische Beiträge in Anschluss an Foucault*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Rose, Nikolas. 2007. *The Politics of Life Itself. Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sunder Rajan, Kaushik. 2006. *Biocapital. The Constitution of Postgenomic Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 2004. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Vatter, Miguel. 2006. Nality and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt. *Revista de Ciencia Política* 26 (3):137-159.

Miguel Vatter is associate professor in the School of Political Science, Universidad Diego Portales, Santiago, Chile and co-founder of the Latin American Biopolitics Research Network. His current areas of research and publication are biopolitics, republicanism, and political theology.

NOTES

ⁱ For some examples, see [Biopolitics of security](#) network; [BIOS](#) at LSE ; [BIOS - Centro di Ricerca sulla Biopolitica](#) ; the [Latin American Biopolitics Research Network](#) ; [Global Biopolitics Research Group](#) ; [Law and Social Sciences Research Network](#) ; [BBPS - Biopolitica, Bioeconomia, Processi di Soggettivazione](#) .

ⁱⁱ For two recent attempts to recover and renew Foucault's concept of an order of things, see (Taylor 2004) and (Agamben 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ For the evolution of Foucault's courses at the Collège de France and the disappearance of the theme of biopolitics, see Frédéric Gros, "Situation du cours" in (Foucault 2001).

^{iv} Lemke is one of the first scholars to have studied systematically Foucault's discourse on governmentality. See (Lemke 1997) and now (Lemke 2007).

^v This is the dimension of biopolitics that lies at the centre of Rose's investigations into "the politics of life itself" and "ethopolitics". See (Rose 2007: 24-27, 39-40).

^{vi} On the biopolitics of production in relation to Foucault's thought, see now also Judith Revel, "Identità, natura, vita: tre deconstruzioni biopolitiche" and Ottavio Marzocca, "Biopolitica, sovranità, lavoro. Foucault tra vida nuda e vita creativa" in (Galzigna 2008).

^{vii} On securitization in Foucault, see now the essays collected in (Purtschert 2008).

^{viii} "We have entered the age of vital politics" (Rose 2007:40).

^{ix} An exception is (Sunder Rajan 2006).

^x See the introduction to this volume by Timothy Campbell which situates Esposito with regard to Italian and French contemporary philosophy, as well as the essays contained in "*Bios, Immunity, Life. The Thought of Roberto Esposito*" (*Diacritics* vol.36, n.2, 2006).

^{xi} For a recent and interesting critique of postmodern communitarianism, see (Marinas 2006).

^{xii} See now (Lemm 2009).

^{xiii} On this point I refer the interested reader to my (Vatter 2006).

^{xiv} The idea of a norm of life in Foucault and Canguilhem is systematically pursued in (Muhle 2008).

^{xv} This argument is now pursued in his deconstruction of the idea of person in (Esposito 2007).