

"Bíos, Immunity, Life: The Thought of Roberto Esposito"  
by Timothy Campbell

No term has captured the interest of political philosophy more in the last decade than biopolitics. Philosophers from traditions as diverse as Marxism, post-structuralism, and psycho-analysis have utilized the term biopolitics to describe what are seen as radical changes occurring in the nature of life. This focus on biopolitics comes naturally since the term seems to capture in its fusion between biology and politics a shift in the way politics is understood and theorized. This shift is measured not only by philosophy of course but also in popular media such as television and the internet. Whether it be immigrants wading ashore in Sicily and the political (and ultimately police) response to it, or the terrorist who blows himself or herself up with the fervent hope of taking as many lives as possible in the process for supposed "political" or "religious" gain, we can sense that politics and power today are concerned more than ever before with life itself, with using life as a means to power or life as an instrument of power.

Yet for all the interest the term has generated, which is witnessed in the increasing space devoted to lexicons and anthologies of biopolitics, few have asked two fundamental questions: where does biopolitics originate and what does it mean to fuse the lemmes *bíos* and politics together into one term? The failure to do so has meant the lack of a proper genealogy of biopolitics; the absence of analyses that attempt simultaneously to historicize the term while seeking to decide whether biopolitics has

positive or negative connotations. Into this void stepped philosopher Roberto Esposito with his magisterial work from 2004 entitled appropriately Bíos: biopolitica e filosofia. Both a mapping of biopolitical dispositifs currently in operation as well as an stunning history of biopolitics from Hobbes to the current war on terror, Bíos, as well as his two earlier works that with Bíos form a trilogy, Communitas and Immunitas, allow us to register how it is that politics has come to be inflected so deeply by an interest in human life.

That Esposito should be the first to do so isn't surprising. For the better part of twenty years he has been intimately involved with problematizing the origins of the most used categories in contemporary political and philosophical categories. Beginning with the notion of the impolitical in Categorie dell'impolitico and the origin and destiny of community as he subtitled his 1999 work, Communitas, Esposito has given us an avowedly postmodern and deconstructive perspective on politics. What makes Bíos especially significant is his attempt to uncover in the relation between community and immunity something like an immanent mechanism underpinning biopolitics. In this sense Esposito uncovers in immunity the unthought (or indeed the repressed) that returns in current discussions of biopolitics, be they in the obsessive emphasis on the negative figure of homo sacer and the state of exception or the incantations of a vital biopolitics of the multitude. In the following introduction to Esposito's thought, I want to make explicit what I see as his critique of how biopolitics has come to be deployed today in Italy and elsewhere. But Bíos and Esposito's thought is much more than that. It represents one of the most powerful lenses available to observe life and how it

continues to be appropriated and crushed by the political. It is also a brilliant attempt to construct out of a negative conception of biopolitics the horizon in which a positive biopolitics must be situated.

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To do so I first sketch the parameters of Esposito's contribution to our current understanding of biopolitics, particularly as they relate to the conceptual centerpiece of Bíos, the "paradigm of immunization." Immunity of course enjoys a long and well-known history in recent critical thought. Niklas Luhmann, for instance, placed immunity at the heart of his systems theory in his 1984 opus Soziale Systeme; Donna Haraway deployed "an immune system discourse" in her seminal reading of postmodern bodies from 1988; while Jean Baudrillard in the early 1990s spoke of artificial sterilization compensating for "faltering internal immunological defenses."<sup>1</sup> For them and for many writing today on immunity, the term quickly folds into auto-immunity, becoming the ultimate horizon in which contemporary politics inscribes itself. Others continued to discuss immunity throughout the 1990s -- Agnes Heller most prominently -- as well as Mark C. Taylor, but no one placed it more forcefully at the center of contemporary politics than did Jacques Derrida in a series of interviews and writings after the "events" of September 11.<sup>2</sup> Speaking of auto-immunity aggression and suicidal auto-immunity, Derrida affiliates the figure of immunity with trauma and a repetition compulsion.<sup>3</sup> As the reader will soon discover, much sets apart Esposito's use of immunity from Derrida's as well as the others mentioned above, especially as it relates to Esposito's radical inversion of immunity in its communal antinomy and the

subsequent effects on our understanding of biopolitics. In the first section, therefore, I attempt to trace where Esposito's use of the immunity paradigm converges and diverges with Derrida and others.

In the second part I situate Esposito's thought more broadly within current thinking on biopolitics. Here obviously the work of Michel Foucault in his seminars from 1975 and 1976 on biopolitics and racism merits considerable attention since it is precisely upon these discourses that Esposito will draw his own reflections in Bíos.<sup>4</sup> But as anyone who has followed the recent fortunes of biopolitics knows, two other Italian figures dominate contemporary discussions of life in all its forms and they both originate in Italy: Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Negri. In Homo Sacer, Remnants of Auschwitz, and The Open, Giorgio Agamben declines biopolitics negatively, anchoring it to the sovereign state of exception that separates bare life (zoé) from political forms of life (bíos).<sup>5</sup> For Toni Negri writing with Michael Hardt, biopolitics takes on a distinctly positive tonality when thought together with the multitude.<sup>6</sup> It is between these two contradictory poles that Esposito's focus on bíos must be understood. Indeed, as I argue here, Bíos comes to resemble something like a synthesis of both Agamben and Negri's positions, with Esposito co-opting Agamben's negative analysis of biopolitics early on, only to criticize later the anti-historical moves that characterize Agamben's association of biopolitics to the state of exception.<sup>7</sup> In some of the most compelling pages Esposito has written, he argues instead for the modern origin of biopolitics in the immunizing features of sovereignty, property, and liberty as they emerge in the writings of Hobbes and Locke. It is at this point that the differences with Hardt and Negri become clear;

they concern not only what Esposito argues is their misguided appropriation of the term biopolitics from Foucault, but also their failure to register the thanatopolitical declension of twentieth-century biopolitics. Essentially, Esposito argues that Hardt and Negri aren't wrong in pushing for an affirmative biopolitics – a project that Esposito himself shares -- but that it can only emerge after a thorough-going deconstruction of the intersection of biology and politics that originates in immunity.

Clearly understanding these Italian contributions to biopolitical discourse is crucial if we are to register the originality of Esposito's argument. Equally though, other critical texts will also help us in situating Bíos within contemporary work on biopolitics -- Judith Butler's reflections on mourning and community in Precarious Life and Giving an Account Oneself come to mind as do Keith Ansell Pearson's Deleuzian musings on symbiosis and viroid life, as well as Peter Sloterdijk's "Regole per il parco umano: Una risposta alla Lettera sull'umanismo di Heidegger," Jürgen Habermas's recent The Future of Human Nature, and Ronald Dworkin's essays on euthanasia and abortion.<sup>8</sup> Here too Esposito's work shares a number of areas of contact with them, ranging from the notion of community, to the genetic engineering that promises to prevent "lives unworthy of life" in Binding and Hoche's phrase.<sup>9</sup> But other texts figure as well, especially as they relate to Esposito's reading of community/immunity. I'll introduce them at appropriate moments so as to tie up some of the loose ends that inevitably result when broad introductions of the sort I'm attempting here are made.

In the final section of the essay I offer some general considerations concerning Esposito's positive inflection of biopolitics, especially through the dispositifs of immunity

and how we might use them to develop an immunitary critique of neo-liberalism. What practices might we develop, what kinds of discourses are available to us that make it more difficult to reproduce the immunitary and hence negative biopolitical inflection of modernity. As Esposito argues, no more important question requires a response from us than this one.

### Community/Immunity

In order to appreciate the originality of Esposito's understanding of biopolitics, I first want to rehearse the relation of community to immunity as Esposito sketches it, not only in Bíos but in his two earlier works, Communitas: Origine e destino della comunità and Immunitas: Protezione e negazione della vita. Reading the terms dialectically, Esposito asks if the relation between community and immunity is ultimately one of contrast and juxtaposition, or rather if the relation isn't part of a larger move in which each term is inscribed reciprocally in the logic of the other. The launching pad for his reflections concerns the principles on which communities are founded. Typically of course, when we think of community, we immediately think of the common, of that which is shared among the members of a group. So too for Esposito: community is inhabited by the communal, by that which is not my own, indeed that begins where "my own" ends. It is what belongs to all or most and is therefore "public in juxtaposition to 'private,' or 'general' (but also 'collective') in contrast to particular."<sup>10</sup> Yet Esposito notes three further meanings of communitas, all associated with the term from which it originates: the Latin munus. The first two meanings of munus -- onus and

officium -- concern obligation and office, while the third centers paradoxically around the term donum, which Esposito glosses as a form of gift that combines the features of the previous two. Drawing on the classic linguistic studies of Benveniste and Mauss, Esposito marks the specific tonality of this communal donum, to signify not simply any gift, but a category of gift that requires, even demands, an exchange in return.<sup>11</sup> "Once one has accepted the munus," Esposito writes, then "one is obliged to return the onus, either in the form of goods or services (officium),"<sup>12</sup> Munus is, therefore, a much more intense form of donum since it requires a subsequent response from the receiver.

Here Esposito distills the political connotations of munus. Unlike donum, munus subsequently marks "the gift that one gives, not the gift that one receives," "the contractual obligation one has vis-à-vis the other," and finally "the gratitude that demands new donations" on the part of the recipient (emphasis in original).<sup>13</sup> Here Esposito's particular declension of community becomes clear: thinking community through communitas will name the gift that keeps on giving, a reciprocity in the giving of a gift that doesn't, indeed, cannot belong to oneself. At its (missing) origin, communitas is constructed around an absent gift, one that members of community cannot keep for themselves. According to Esposito, this debt or obligation of gift-giving operates as a kind of originary defect for all those belonging to a community. The defect revolves around the pernicious effects of reciprocal donation on individual identity. Accepting the munus directly undermines the capacity of the individual to identify himself or herself as such and not as part of the community.

I want to hold the defective features of communitas in reserve for the moment and re-introduce the question of immunity since it is precisely the immunitary mechanism that will link community to biopolitics.<sup>14</sup> For Esposito, immunity is co-terminus with community. It does not simply negate communitas by protecting it from what is external, but rather is inscribed in the horizon of the communal munus. Immune is he – and immunity is clearly gendered as masculine in the examples from classical Rome that Esposito cites -- who is exonerated or has received a dispensatio from reciprocal gift-giving. He who has been freed from communal obligations or who enjoys an originary autonomy or successive freeing from a previously contracted debt enjoys the condition of immunitas. The relationship immunity maintains with individual identity emerges clearly here. Immunity connotes the means by which the individual is defended from the "expropriative effects" of the community, protecting the one who carries it from the risk of contact with those who do not (the risk being precisely the loss of individual identity).<sup>15</sup> As a result, the borders separating what is one's own from the communal are reinstated when the "substitution of private or individualistic models for communitarian forms of organization" take place.<sup>16</sup> It follows therefore that the condition of immunity signifies both "not to be and not to have in common."<sup>17</sup> Seen from this perspective, immunity presupposes community, but also negates it, so that rather than centered simply on reciprocity, community doubles upon itself, protecting itself from a presupposed excess of communal gift-giving. For Esposito, the conclusion can only be that "to survive, a community, every community is forced to introject the negativity of its own opposite, even if that opposite remains a



contrastive and lacking mode of the community itself."<sup>18</sup> It is this introjection of negativity or immunity that will form the basis of Esposito's reading of modern biopolitics. Esposito will argue that the modern subject who enjoys civil and political rights is itself an attempt to attain immunity from the contagion of the possibility of community. Such an attempt to immunize the individual from what is common ends up putting at risk the community as immunity turns upon itself and its constituent element.

### Immunity and Modernity

Those familiar with Jean-Luc Nancy's writings on the inoperative community or Alphonso Lingis' reflections on the shared nothingness of community will surely hear echoes of both in much of the above synopsis.<sup>19</sup> What sets Esposito's analysis apart from them is the degree to which he reads immunity as a historical category inextricably linked to modernity.

That politics has always in some way been preoccupied with defending life doesn't detract from the fact that beginning from a certain moment that coincides exactly with the origins of modernity, such a self-defensive requirement was identified not only and simply as a given, but as both a problem and a strategic option. This means that all civilizations past and present faced and in some way solved the needs of their own immunization, but that only in the

modern ones does immunization constitute its most intimate essence. One might come to assert that it wasn't modernity that raised the question of the self-preservation of life, but that self-preservation raises itself in modernity's being (essere), which is to say it invents modernity as a historical and categorical apparatus that is capable of coping (risolvere) with it.<sup>20</sup>

For Esposito, modernity doesn't begin simply in the institution of sovereign power and its theorization in Hobbes as Foucault argues. Rather modernity appears precisely when it becomes possible to theorize a relation between the communitarian munus, which Esposito associates with a Hobbesian state of generalized conflict, and the institution of sovereign power that acts to protect, or better to immunize, the community from a threatened return to conflict.

If we were to push Esposito's argument, it might be more appropriate to speak of the sovereign who immunizes the community from the community's own implicit excesses: the desire to acquire the goods of another, and the violence implicated in such a relation. When its individual members become subject to sovereign power, that is when it no longer is possible to accept the numerous threats the community poses to itself and to its individual members, the community immunizes itself by instituting sovereign power. With the risk of conflict inscribed at the very heart of community, consisting as it does in interaction, or perhaps better, in the equality between its members, immunization doesn't precede or follow the moment of community, but

appears simultaneously as its "intimate essence." The moment when the immunitary aporia of community is recognized as the strategic problem for nascent European nation-states signals the advent of modernity since it is then that sovereign power is linked theoretically to communal self-preservation and self-negation.<sup>21</sup>

Two further reflections ought to be made at this point. First, by focusing on the immunizing features of sovereignty as it emerges in modernity, Esposito takes issue with a distinction Foucault makes between the paradigm of sovereignty and that of governmentality. We recall that for Foucault, governmentality marks the "tactics of government which make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the State and what is not, the public versus the private, and so on." These tactics are linked to the emergence of the population as an objective of power which culminates at the end of the eighteenth century, particularly regarding campaigns to reduce mortality.<sup>22</sup> A full-fledged regime of governmentality for Foucault cannot be thought separately from the emergence of biopower that takes control of "life in general - with the body as one pole and the population as the other" in the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Esposito, however, shows how Foucault oscillates between sovereignty and governmentality precisely because of his failure to theorize the immunitary declension of both terms. Both are inscribed in a modern biopolitical horizon thanks to a modernity that strengthens exponentially its own immunitary characteristics.

Second, Esposito's focus on immunity ought to be compared to recent attempts, most notably by Judith Butler, to construct a conceptual language for describing gender and sexuality as modes of relation, one that would "provide a way of thinking about

how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well."<sup>24</sup> Esposito's language of an always already immunized and immunizing munus suggests that Butler is clearly right in affirming the importance of relationality for imagining community, but at the same time that any hoped for future community constructed on "the social vulnerability of bodies" will founder on the implicit threat contained in any relation among the same socially constituted bodies.<sup>25</sup> In other words, an ecology of socially interdependent bodies doesn't necessarily ensure vulnerability, but might actually augment calls for protection. Thus the frequent suggestion of immunity in Butler whenever the body appears in all its vulnerability or the threat of contagion symbolically produced by the presumed enemy.<sup>26</sup> For his part, Esposito is attempting something different: the articulation a political semantics that can lead to a non-immunized (or radically communitized) life.<sup>27</sup>

#### Auto-immunity after September 11

Yet Esposito's diagnosis of the present biopolitical scene doesn't rest exclusively on a reading the antinomies of community in immunity or for that matter on the modern roots of immunization in the institution of sovereignty. In Bíos and Immunitas, Esposito sketches the outlines of a global auto-immunity crisis that grows more dangerous and lethal by the day. The reason, Esposito argues, has primarily to do with our continuing failure to appreciate how much of our current political crises is the result of a collective failure to interrogate the immunitary logic associated with modern political thought. In somewhat similar fashion, Jacques Derrida also urged forward an

auto-immunity diagnosis of the current political moment, beginning in his writings on religion with Gianni Vattimo, then in The Politics of Friendship and most famously in his interviews in the aftermath of September 11. I want to summarize briefly how Derrida conjoins politics to auto-immunity so as to distinguish Esposito's own use of the term from Derrida's. Setting out their differences is a necessary step to understanding more fully the contemporary formation of power and what strategies are available to resolve the current moment of political auto-immunity crises.

In "Faith and Religion," his contribution to Gianni Vattimo's volume entitled On Religion, Derrida utilizes the optic of immunity to describe a situation in which religion returns to the forefront of political discourse. Interestingly, the change will be found in religion's relation to immunity. For Derrida (auto)immunity names the mode by which religion and science are reciprocally inscribed in each other. And so any contemporary analysis of religion must begin with the recognition that religion at the end of the millennium "accompanies and precedes" what he calls "the critical and tele-technoscience reason," or better those technologies that decrease the distance and increase the speed of communications globally, which he links to capitalism and the Anglo-American idiom.<sup>28</sup> The same movement that makes religion and the tele-technoscience coextensive results in a counter-move of immunity. Drawing upon the etymological roots of religion in religio, which he associates with repetition and then with performance, Derrida shows how religion's iterability presupposes the automatic and the machine-like; in other words, presupposes a technique that marks the possibility of faith. Delivering technique (technology) over to a faith in iterability shared

with religion, allows him to identify the auto-immunitary logic underpinning the current moment of religious revival and crises. He writes: "It [the movement that renders religion and tele-technoscientific reason] secretes its own antidote but also its own power of auto-immunity. We are here in a space where all self-protection of the unscathed, of the safe and sound, of the sacred (heilig, holy) must protect itself against its own protection, its own police, its own power of rejection, in short against its own, which is to say, against its own immunity."<sup>29</sup>

In the context of the overlapping fields of religion and tele-technoscientific reason, immunity is always auto-immunity for Derrida and hence always destructive. It is immunal because on the one hand, religion -- he will substitute the term faith repeatedly for it -- cannot allow itself to share performativity with tele-reason as the effects of that same reason inevitably lead to an undermining of the basis for religion in tradition, that is in maintaining a holy space apart from its iterable features.

Furthermore, it is auto-immunal to the degree that the protection of the sacred space, the "unscathed" of the previous quote, is created precisely thanks to the same iterability, the same features of performance that it shares with tele-technoscientific reason. The result is a protective attack against protection itself, or a crises in auto-immunity.

Not surprisingly, religious (auto)immunity also has a biopolitical declension for Derrida though he never refers to it as such. Thus in the mechanical principle by which religions say they value life, they do so only by privileging a transcendental form of life. "Life" for many religions, Derrida writes, "is sacred, holy, infinitely respectable only in the name of what is worth more than it and what is not restricted to the naturalness of

the bio-zoological (sacrificeable)."<sup>30</sup> In this, biological life is repeatedly transcended or made the supplement religion provides to life. So doing, transcendence opens up the community, constitutively formed around the living, to the "space of death that is linked to the automaton [...] to technics, the machine, prosthesis: in a word, to the dimensions of the auto-immune and self-sacrificial supplementarity, to this death drive that is silently at work in every community, every auto-co-immunity" (emphasis in original).<sup>31</sup> For Derrida (as for Esposito) the aporia of immunity operates in every community, based upon "a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection."<sup>32</sup> At the origin of religious immunity lies the distinction between bio-zoological or anthro-po-theological life and transcendental, sacred life that calls forth sacrifices in almost parasitical form so as to protect its own dignity. If there is a biopolitical moment to be found in Derrida's analysis of religion and auto-immunity, it will be found here in difference between biological life and transcendental life that will continually require the difference between the two to be maintained. It is, needless to say, despite the contemporary context that informs Derrida's analysis, a conceptual aporia that precedes the discussion of capitalism, life, and late twentieth-century technology. Writing in 1994, Derrida gestures to these changes, but in his analysis of the resurgence of religion within a certain kind of political discourse, auto-immunity co-originate with religion in the West.

Whether the same holds true in the political dimension, Derrida doesn't actually answer, at least not in his important work from 1997, The Politics of Friendship. There instead, after the requisite footnote marking the debt he owes Blanchot, Bataille and

Nancy, Derrida emphasizes a different political declension of (political) community, one based on a certain form of friendship of separation undergirding philosophical attempts to think a future community of solitary friends. He writes:

Thus is announced the anchoritic community of those who love in separation ... The invitation comes to you from those who can love only at a distance, in separation ... Those who love only in cutting ties are the uncompromising friends of solitary singularity. They invite you to enter into this community of social disaggregation [déliation], which is not necessarily a secret society, a conjuration, the occult sharing of esoteric or crypto-poetic knowledge. The classical concept of the secret belongs to a thought of the community, solidarity, or the sect - initiation or private space which represents the very thing the friends who speak to you as a friend of solitude has rebelled against (emphasis in original).<sup>33</sup>

Here a different form of political relationship emerges, one linked to Bataille's "community of those without community," and one at least initially distinct from the auto-immunizing features of religion. Derrida suggests as much with his gesture here to singularity, to those separate entities, whose very separateness functions as the invitation to the common.<sup>34</sup> At the same time Derrida does preface the remarks with the adjective anchoritic, thereby associating the form of distant love afforded those who



have withdrawn for religious reasons from the world with a political dimension.

Derrida suggests that in the separateness of singularity it may be possible to avoid some of the immunizing features of community that emerged with his discussion on faith.

If I have focused initially on these two pieces in an introduction to Esposito's thought, it is because they inform much of Derrida's important reflections on global auto-immunity in the wake of September 11. Without rehearsing here all of the intricacies of his analysis, the re-introduction of the notion of auto-immunity into a more properly political discourse, both in his interviews with Giovanna Borradori after September 11 and in his later reflections on democracy in *Rogues*, show Derrida extending the auto-immune process to two related fronts: first, to a constituent "pervertibility of democracy" at the heart of defining democracy, and second to the suicidal, auto-immune crises that has marked American foreign policy since the 1980s. As for the first, democracy for Derrida appears to have at its heart a paradoxical meaning, one in which it both continually postpones the moment when it can be fully realized as the political government in which the many rule and simultaneously the possibility that when such an event comes, the many may precisely vote to suspend democracy. Writing with the recent experience of 1990s Algeria in mind, Derrida argues that "democracy has always been suicidal" because there are always some who do not form part of the many and who must be excluded or sent off.<sup>35</sup> The result, and it is one that we ought to keep in mind when attempting to think Esposito's thought on community/immunity, is that "the autoimmune topology always dictates that democracy be sent off [renvoyer] elsewhere, that it be excluded or rejected, expelled

under the pretext of protecting it on the inside by expelling, rejecting, or sending off to the outside the domestic enemies of democracy."<sup>36</sup> For Derrida, auto-immunity is inscribed "right onto the concept of democracy" so that "democracy is never properly what it is, never itself. For what is lacking in democracy is proper meaning, the very [même] meaning of the selfsame [même] ... the it-self [soi-même] , the selfsame, the properly selfsame of the itself.<sup>37</sup> A fundamental, constitutive lack of the proper marks democracy.

Esposito's analysis of the immunity aporia of community does, much like Derrida's analysis of democracy, implicitly evoke in community something like democracy, but we ought to be careful in linking the two discussions on auto-immunity too closely. First, because Esposito clearly refuses to collapse the process of immunization into a full-blown auto-immune suicidal tendency at the heart of community. That he doesn't has to do primarily with the larger project of which Bíos and Immunitas are a part, namely how to think an affirmative biopolitics through the lens of immunity. Esposito's stunning elaboration of a positive immunity evidenced by mother and fetus in Immunitas is the proof that immunity doesn't necessarily degenerate – and that sense is hardly unavoidable in Derrida's discussion – into a suicidal auto-immunity crises. In this, Esposito sketches the outlines of an affirmative model of biopolitical immunity whereas rarely if ever does Derrida make explicit the conceptual language of biopolitics that undergirds his analysis.

But as I mentioned above, Derrida speaks of auto-immunity in a different context, one that characterizes American foreign policy after September 11 as essentially

an auto-immune reaction to previous cold war policy that armed and trained former freedom fighters during the cold war's hot phase in Afghanistan in the early 1980s. He says:

Immigrated, trained, prepared for their act in the United States by the United States, these hijackers incorporate so to speak, two suicides in one; their own (and one will remain forever defenseless in the face of a suicidal, autoimmunitary aggression -- and that is what terrorizes most) but also the suicide of those who welcomed, armed and trained them (emphasis in original).<sup>38</sup>

The soul-searching among the British in response to the bombings in London in the summer of 2005 is clearly proof of the correctness of Derrida's analysis; in this country a similar analogy might be found with the Oklahoma City bombings (though there was clearly less reflection here on the elements that contributed to that instance of suicidal immunity than in the United Kingdom). In any case by linking the American foreign policy to suicide via auto-immunity, Derrida not only acknowledges an important historical context for understanding September 11, but implicitly links "these hijackers" to technical proficiency and high-tech knowledge and so it would seem to his earlier analysis of tele-reason and technology as reciprocally implicated in religious iterability. Although space doesn't allow more than a mere mention, it might be useful to probe further the overdetermined connection of the "religious" in radical Islamic fundamentalism with just such a technological prowess. In any case, for the present

discussion what matters most is that Derrida believes that September 11 cannot be thought independently of the figure of immunity; indeed that as long as the United States continues to play the role of "guarantor or guardian of the entire world order," auto-immunitary aggression will continue, provoked in turn by future traumatizing events that may be far worse than September 11.

How then does Esposito's reading of an immunological lexicon in biopolitics differ from Derrida's? First, where Derrida's emphasis falls repeatedly on auto-immunity as the privileged outcome of American geopolitics in the period preceding September 11, Esposito carefully avoids conflating immunity with auto-immunity; instead he repeatedly returns to the question of munus and modernity's attempts to immunize itself against the ever present threat, from its perspective, of immunity's reversal into the communal; from immunization to communization.<sup>39</sup> Writing at length in Immunitas on the imperative of security that assails all contemporary social systems and the process by which risk and protection strengthen each other reciprocally, he describes the auto-immunity crises of biopolitics and with it the possibility of a dialectical reversal into community. "Evidently, we are dealing," Esposito writes, "with a limit point beyond which the entire biopolitical horizon risks entering in a lethal contradiction with itself." He continues:

This doesn't mean that we can turn back the clock, perhaps reactivating the ancient figures of sovereign power. It isn't possible today to imagine a politics that doesn't turn to life as such, that doesn't look at the citizen from the point of

view of his living body. But this can happen reciprocally in opposite forms that put into play the different meanings of biopolitics: on the one hand the self-destructive revolt of immunity against itself or the opening to its reversal in community.<sup>40</sup>

Looking back today at the series of attempts after September 11 in this country to immunize the "homeland" from future attack -- the term itself a powerful immunizing operator -- it isn't hard to imagine that we are in the midst of a full scale auto-immunity crises whose symptomology Derrida and Esposito diagnose.

Yet a political auto-immunity crises isn't the only possible biopolitical outcome of the present moment. Esposito suggests that another possibility exists, one to which his own affirmative biopolitics is directed, namely creating the conditions in which it becomes possible to identify and deconstruct the principal twentieth-century biopolitical, or better thanatopolitical dispositifs that have historically characterized the modern immunitary paradigm. Only after we have sufficiently understood the extent to which our political categories operate to immunize the collective political body from a different set of categories associated with community can we reorient ourselves to the affirmative biopolitical opening presented by the current crises in immunity. This opening to community as the site in which an affirmative biopolitics can emerge is the result of a dialectical reversal at the heart of the immunitary paradigm: once we recognize that immunization is the mode by which biopolitics has been declined since the dawn of modernity, the question becomes how to rupture the juncture between

biology and politics, between bíos and politikos. The necessary first step is moving away from a rationality of bodies when attempting to locate the object of politics, and so shifting the conceptual ground on which immunization depends. An affirmative biopolitics thought through the munus of community precedes with the recognition that a new logic is required to conceptualize and represent a new community, a coming "virtual" community, Esposito will say with Deleuze, characterized by its impersonal singularity or its singular impersonality, whose confines will run "from men to plants, to animals independent of the material of their individuation."<sup>41</sup>

### Biopolitics and Contemporary Italian Thought

The reference to a virtual, future community immediately recalls two other contemporary thinkers from Italy who are deeply engaged with the notion of biopolitics in its contemporary configuration. Of course I am speaking of Antonio Negri and Giorgio Agamben. That modern Italian political philosophy has emerged as perhaps the primary locus for research related to biopolitics is not happenstance. Few places have been as fertile for Foucault's teachings; few places so well-primed historically and politically to reflect on and extend his work. The reasons, it seems to me, have to do principally with a rich tradition of political philosophy in Italy – we need only remember Machiavelli, Vico, de Sanctis, Croce, and Gramsci for instance -- associated with the specificity of the Italian history and a political scene characterized by the immunizing city-state.<sup>42</sup> Many other reasons may account for it, but what they together spell is an ongoing engagement in Italy with politics thought in a biopolitical key.<sup>43</sup>

With that said, the more one reads of recent Italian contributions to biopolitics, the more two diverging lines appear to characterize them: one associated with the figure of Agamben and the negative tonality he awards biopolitics; the other a radically affirmative biopolitics given it in the writings of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri. As the originality of Esposito's reading of modern biopolitics cannot be appreciated apart from the implicit dialogue that runs through Bíos with both Agamben and Hardt and Negri, I want to summarize these two often competing notions of biopolitics. What emerges in Esposito's analysis is a thorough critique of both Negri and Agamben; his pinpointing of their failures to think through the immunity aporia that characterizes their respective configurations of biopolitics, leads to his own attempt to design a future, affirmative biopolitics. That all three launch their reflections from essentially the same texts, namely Foucault's series of lectures collected in English in Society Must be Defended and the fifth chapter of The History of Sexuality suggests that we ought to begin there for an initial definition of biopolitics before turning to their respective appropriations of Foucault.

For Foucault, biopolitics is another name for a technology of power, a biopower, which to be distinguished from the mechanisms of discipline that emerge at the end of the eighteenth century. This new configuration of power aims to take "control of life and the biological processes of man as species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined but regularized.<sup>44</sup> The biopolitical apparatus includes "forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures," in a word "security mechanisms [that] have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to

optimize a state of life."<sup>45</sup> As such biopolitics is juxtaposed in Foucault's analysis to the power of sovereignty leading to the important distinction between them: "It [biopower] is the power to make live. Sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power that I would call the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting die."<sup>46</sup> Biopower thus is that which guarantees the continuous living of the human species. What turns out to be of almost greater importance, however, for Agamben, Negri, and Esposito, is the relation Foucault will draw between an emerging biopower at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, often in opposition to individual disciplinary mechanisms and its culmination in Nazism. For Foucault, what links eighteenth-century biopower to Nazi biopower is precisely their shared mission in limiting the aleatory element of life and death. Thus, "[C]ontrolling the random element inherent in biological processes was one of the regime's immediate objectives."<sup>47</sup> This is not to say that the Nazis simply operated one-dimensionally on the body politic; as Foucault notes repeatedly, the Nazis had recourse again and again to disciplinary power; in fact "no State could have more disciplinary power than the Nazi regime," presumably because the attempts to amplify biopower depended upon certain concurrent disciplinary tools.<sup>48</sup> For Foucault, the specificity of the Nazis' lethal biopower resides in its ability to combine and thereby intensify the power directed both to the individual and the collective body.

Certainly other vectors criss-cross biopolitics in Foucault's analysis, and a number of scholars have done remarkable jobs in locating them, but the above outline is sufficient for describing the basis upon which Agamben, Hardt and Negri, and Esposito



frame their respective analyses.<sup>49</sup> Thus Agamben's notion of biopolitics is certainly indebted to the one sketched above - the impression that modernity produces a certain form of biopolitical body is inescapable reading Agamben as it is one implicit in Foucault. But Agamben's principal insight for thinking biopolitics concerns precisely the distinction between bíos and zoé and the process by which he links the sovereign exception to the production of a biopolitical, or better a zoo-political body. Indeed Homo Sacer opens with precisely this distinction:

The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word 'life.' They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: zoé, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods) and bíos, which indicated the form or way of life proper to an individual or group.<sup>50</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment whether in fact these terms exhaust the Greek lexicon for life, Agamben attempts to demonstrate the preponderance of zoé for the production of the biopolitical body.<sup>51</sup> The reason will be found in what Agamben following Carl Schmitt calls the sovereign exception, that is the process by which sovereign power is premised on the exclusion of those who are simply alive when seen from the perspective of the polis.<sup>52</sup> Thus Agamben speaks of an inclusive exclusion of zoé from political life, "almost as if politics were the place in which life had to transform itself into good and in which what had to be politicized were always already bare life."<sup>53</sup> A

number of factors come together to condition politics as the site of exclusion, but chief among them is the role of language, by which man "separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion."<sup>54</sup> The homo sacer is precisely the political figure that embodies what is for Agamben the originary political relation: it is the name of the life excluded from the political life (bíos) that sovereignty institutes; not so much an ontology of the one excluded (and therefore featuring an unconditional capacity to be killed), but more the product of the relation in which bíos is premised not upon another form of life, but rather on zoé (since zoé is not by definition such a form), and its principal characteristic of being merely alive and hence killable.

In such a scheme, the weight afforded the classical state of exception is great indeed, and so at least initially biopolitics for Agamben is always already inscribed in the sovereign exception. Thus Agamben will de-emphasize the Foucaultian analysis of the emergence of biopower in the late nineteenth century, since it represents less a radical rupture with sovereignty or for that matter a disciplinary society, and will instead foreground the means by which biopolitics intensifies to the point that in the twentieth century it will be transformed into thanatopolitics for both totalitarian and democratic states. Certainly a number of differences remain between the classic and modern models of biopolitics -- notably the dispersal of sovereign power to the physician and scientist so that the homo sacer no longer is simply an analogue to the sovereign -- and of course Agamben will go out of his way to show how the political space of modernity is in fact a biopolitical space linked to "the birth of the camps."<sup>55</sup> But

the overwhelming impression is of a kind of flattening of the specificity of a modern biopolitics in favor of a metaphysical reading of the originary and infinite state of exception that has since its inception eroded the political foundations of social life. For Agamben, an authentically political bíos always withdraws in favor of the merely biological.<sup>56</sup> The result is a politics that is potentially forever in ruins in Marco Revelli's description, or a politics that is always already declined negatively as biopolitical.<sup>57</sup>

Where Agamben's negative characterization of contemporary biopolitics as thanatopolitics depends upon the predominance of zoé over bíos, Hardt and Negri's radical affirmation of biopolitics centers instead around the productive features of bíos, and "identifying the materialist dimension of the concept beyond any conception that is purely naturalistic (life as 'zoé') or simply anthropological (as Agamben in particular has a tendency to do, making the concept in effect indifferent)."<sup>58</sup> Leaving aside for the moment the descriptor "indifferent," which it seems to me fails to mark the radical negativity of Agamben's use of the term, what stands out in Hardt and Negri's reading of biopolitics is the mode by which they join contemporary forms of collective subjectivity to the transformations in the nature of labor to what a number of Italian Marxist thinkers have termed immaterial labor.<sup>59</sup> Thinking together these changes in forms of labor -- ones characterized not by the factory but rather by "the intellectual, immaterial, and communicative labor power" affiliated with new communication technologies -- through Foucault's category of biopower allows Hardt and Negri to see biopolitics as both the locus in which power exerts itself in empire and the site in which new subjectivities, what they call social singularities, subsequently emerge. Thus the

term "biopolitical" characterizes not only the new social formation of singularities called the multitude, but also the emergence of a new, democratic sovereignty, one joined to a radically different understanding of the common.

As Hardt and Negri themselves readily admit, reading the multitude ontologically as a biopolitical social formation represents a significant reversal if not outright break with Foucault's conception of biopolitics. Where Foucault often associates the negative features of biopower with its object, a biopolitical subject, Hardt and Negri deanchor biopolitics from its base in biopower in the current moment of empire to read it primarily and affirmatively as a social category. Thus: "Biopolitical production is a matter of ontology in that it constantly creates a new social being, a new human nature" linked to the "continuous encounters, communications, and concatenations of bodies."<sup>60</sup> They do the same in their reading of Agamben, foregoing his declension of a twentieth century thanatopolitics by evoking instead a new form of sovereignty in which the state of exception presumably either no longer operates or is soon overwhelmed by the rhizomatic production of singular multitudes, unveiling the illusory nature of modern sovereignty.<sup>61</sup> In its place the multitude produces a concept of the common, which "breaks the continuity of modern state sovereignty and attacks biopower at its heart, demystifying its sacred core. All that is general or public must be reappropriated and managed by the multitude and thus become common."<sup>62</sup>

Transposing into the biopolitical language we have used to this point, Hardt and Negri juxtapose the affirmative biopolitics associated with the multitude and the common to biopower and its privileging of modern sovereignty.

In Bíos Esposito takes up a position directly opposite both Agamben and Hardt and Negri and their conflicting uses of biopolitics. First Agamben. Certainly Esposito's genealogy of biopolitics shares many features with Agamben's reading of modern biopolitics through the figure of the homo sacer. Indeed the chapter on thanatopolitics and the cycle of ghénos is nothing short of an explicit dialogue with Agamben and his biopolitical interpretation of Nazism, as well as an implicit critique of Agamben's biopolitics. To see why, we need to rehearse briefly the chief lines of argument Esposito develops for working through the coordinates of the Nazi biopolitics. Significantly, Esposito first pinpoints an oscillation in Foucault's reading of Nazism. On the one hand, Nazism for Foucault shares the same biopolitical valence with a number of modern regimes, specifically socialist, which Foucault links to a racist matrix. On the other hand, the mode by which Foucault frames his interpretations of Nazism privileges the singular nature of the "Nazi event" as Esposito calls it. The result is an underlying inconsistency in Foucault's reading: either Nazi biopolitics is inscribed along with socialism as racism, and hence is no longer a singular event, or it maintains its singularity when the focus turns to its relation to modernity.<sup>63</sup>

The second line will be found in Esposito's principal question concerning the position of life in Nazi biopolitics. "Why, unlike all other political forms past and present," he asks, "did the Nazis push the homicidal temptations of biopolitics to its full realization?"<sup>64</sup> That his answer will move through the category of immunization suggests that Esposito refuses to superimpose Nazi thanatopolitics too directly over contemporary biopolitics.<sup>65</sup> Rather he attempts to inscribe the most significant elements

of the Nazi biopolitical apparatus in the larger project of immunizing life through the production of death. In so doing death becomes both the object and the therapeutic instrument for curing the German body politic; simultaneously the cause and the remedy of "illness." Esposito dedicates much of the final third of Bíos to elaborating the immunizing features of Nazi biopolitics in order to reconstruct the move from a modern biopolitics to a Nazi thanatopolitics. The Nazi immunitary apparatus, he theorizes, is characterized by the absolute normativization of life, the double enclosure of the body, and the anticipatory suppression of life. Space doesn't allow me to analyze each, though the reader will certainly find some of the most compelling pages of Bíos here. More useful is to ask where Esposito's overall portrayal of Nazi biopolitics diverges from that of Agamben in immunization. First, by focusing on the ways in which bíos becomes a juridical category and nómos (law) a biologized one, Esposito doesn't directly challenge Agamben's reading of the state of exception as an aporia of Western politics, one the Nazis intensified enormously so that the state of exception becomes the norm. Rather he privileges the figure of immunization as the ultimate horizon within which to understand Nazi political, social, juridical, and medical policies. In a sense he folds the state of exception in the more global reading of modern immunity dispositifs.

Implicit in the optic of immunity is a critique of the categories by which Nazism has been understood, two of which are primarily sovereignty and the state of exception.<sup>66</sup> By privileging the immunitary paradigm for an understanding Nazi biopolitics, Esposito foregoes Agamben's folding of sovereignty into biopolitics (and so

bypasses the mussulmann as the embodiment of the twentieth-century homo sacer), focusing instead on the biocratic elements of the Nazi dictatorship. He notes for instance the requirement that doctors had to legitimate Nazi political decisions, which previously had been translated into the Reich's new legal codes, as well as the required presence of a physician in all aspects of the workings of the concentration camp from selection to the crematoria. Esposito's analysis not only draws upon Robert Lifton's classic description of the Nazi State as a "biocracy," but more importantly urges forward the overarching role that immunization plays in the Nazi understanding of its own political goals; indeed the Nazi politicization of medicine cannot be fully understood apart from the attempt to immunize the Aryan race.<sup>67</sup> Central therefore to Esposito's reading of the biopolitical tonality of the Nazi dictatorship is the recognition of the therapeutic goal the Nazis assigned the concentration camp: only by exterminating the Jews did the Nazis believe that the German ghénos could be strengthened and protected. And so for Esposito the specificity of the Nazi experience for modernity resides in the actualization of biology, when "the transcendental of Nazism" becomes life, its subject race, and its lexicon biological.<sup>68</sup>

### An Affirmative Biopolitics?

The same reasons underlying Esposito's critique of Agamben's biopolitics also spell out his differences with Hardt and Negri. Not only does Esposito explicitly distance himself from their reading of the multitude as an affirmative biopolitical actor who resists biopower -- he notes how their line of interpretation pushes well beyond

Foucault's manifest intentions when delimiting biopolitics, beyond the resistance of life to power-- but he asks a decisive question for their use of biopolitics as an organizing principle around which they posit their critique of empire. "If life is stronger than the power that assails it; if the resistance of life doesn't allow it to bend to the pressures exerted by power, then how is it that the result modernity arrives at is the mass production of death?"<sup>69</sup> In a number of interviews Esposito has continued to challenge Hardt and Negri's reading of biopolitics. What troubles Esposito principally is a categorical (or historical) amnesia vis-à-vis modernity's negative inflection of biopolitics.<sup>70</sup>

Essentially, Esposito charges that Hardt and Negri's reading of the multitude is riven by the same immunitary aporia that characterizes Agamben's negative biopolitics. In what way does the biopolitical multitude escape the immunitary aporia that resides at the heart of any creation of the common? Although he doesn't state so explicitly, Esposito's analysis suggests that folding biopower into the social in no way saves Hardt and Negri from the long and deadly genealogy of biopolitics in which life is protected and strengthened through death; in what Esposito calls the "enigma" of biopolitics. Esposito laid some of the groundwork for such a critique in the early 1990s when in a series of reflections on the impolitical, he urged forward a thorough deconstruction of many of the same political categories that undergird Hardt and Negri's analysis, most particularly sovereignty. It certainly is plausible (and productive) to read Bíos through an impolitical lens, in which Esposito offers biopolitics as the latest and ultimate of all the modern politics categories that require deconstruction. Indeed, it's not by chance



that the first chapter of Bíos aggressively positions biopolitics not only as one of the most significant ways of organizing contemporary political discourse, but also as the principal challenger to the classic political category of sovereignty. For Esposito, sovereignty, be it a new global sovereignty called empire or the long-lived national variety, doesn't transcend biopolitics, but rather is immanent to the workings of the immunitary mechanism that he sees driving all forms of modern (bio)politics. The multitude remains inscribed in modern sovereignty, whose final horizon, following Esposito's reading of Foucault, is the immunitary paradigm itself. In other words, the multitude remains anchored to a genealogy of biopolitics. Thus Esposito not only deeply questions the hermeneutic value of imperial sovereignty for understanding the contemporary political scene or for imagining a progressive politics oriented to the future, but also points to a sovereign remainder in the figure of multitude.

Bíos also offers another less explicit objection to Esposito's analysis of Hardt and Negri's use of the term biopolitics. We recall that for Hardt and Negri the multitude produces a new concept of the common, which corresponds to their belief that the multitude represents a rupture with all forms of state sovereignty. This occurs thanks to the economic and biopolitical activity of the multitude, which coincides with a "commonality created by the positive externalities or by the new informational networks, and more generally by all the cooperative and communicative forms of labor."<sup>71</sup> The multitude mobilizes the common in the move from a res-publica to a res-communis, in which the multitude comes to embody ever more the expansive logic of singularity-commonality. However, Esposito's reading of communitas/immunitas

sketched above suggests that there is no common obligation joining members of a community in potentia that can be thought apart from attempts to immunize the community, or in this case the multitude. As Esposito notes recently, "without this immunity apparatus individual and common life would die away."<sup>72</sup> The impolitical question Esposito raises for Hardt and Negri is precisely whether the new biopolitical multitude somehow transcends the political aporia of immunity that undergirds every conception of community. Perhaps in the new configuration of the common that they describe and the fundamental changes in the nature of immaterial production, the global munus changes as well, so that unlike every previous form of community, the multitude no longer has any need of immunizing itself from the perils of communitas. Just such a reading is suggested by Hardt and Negri's repeated troping of the multitude as a network of rhizomatic singularities, who presumably would have less need of immunizing themselves since the network itself provides the proper threshold of virtual contact. Esposito in Bíos implicitly raises the question of whether these singularities acting in common and so forming "a new race or, rather, a new humanity" don't also produce new forms of immunity.<sup>73</sup>

Immunity, we recall, emerges as a constituent element of community for Esposito, when the common threatens personal identity. Thus it isn't difficult to read those pages in Bíos dedicated for instance to the immunitary mechanism in Locke as aimed as well at Hardt and Negri. Writing apropos of "the potential risk of a world that is given in common (and therefore exposed to an unlimited indistinction) is neutralized by an element presupposed in the originary manifestation ... namely that of the

relationship one has with oneself in the form of personal identity," Esposito once again situates personal identity as the subject and object of immunitary protection.<sup>74</sup> The res-communis that Hardt and Negri see as one of the most important productions of the multitude is in Esposito's reading of Locke always seen as a threat to a res propria.

Following this line of inquiry, Bíos asks us what becomes of personal identity when the multitude produces the new sense of the common? Is it now less a threat given new forms of communication and labor or rather does the threat to individual identity increase given the sheer power of extension Hardt and Negri award the multitude? What is at stake isn't only a question of identity or difference here, but the prevalence of one or the other in the multitude. Seen in this optic, their emphasis on the singularity and commonality of the multitude may in fact be an attempt to ward off any suggestion of an underlying antinomy between the multitude as a radically new social formation and personal identity.

### A Communal Bíos?

Given these differences, the obvious question will be what form Esposito awards his own conception of biopolitics such that it avoids the kinds of difficulties raised in these other contributions. After two illuminating readings of bíos in Arendt and Heidegger -- which may be read as dialoging with Agamben's discussion of homo sacer and his appropriation of "the open" via Heidegger -- Esposito sets out to construct just such a affirmative vision by "opening the black box of biopolitics," returning to the three dispositifs that he had previously used to characterize the Nazi bio-thanatological project and then reversing them. These are the normativization of life, the double

enclosure of the body, and the anticipatory suppression of life that I noted above. The effect of appropriating them so as to reverse Nazi immunitary procedures will surprise and certainly challenge many readers. Esposito clearly is aware of such a possible reaction and his response merits a longer citation:

What does it mean exactly to overturn them? And then to turn them inside out? What needs to be attempted is to use the same categories of "life," "body," and "birth," and to convert their immunitary declension, which is to say their self-negating declension, in a direction that is open to the more originary and intense meaning of communitas. Only in this way -- in the point of intersection and of tension among contemporary reflections that are moving along this path -- is it possible to sketch the first features of a biopolitics that is finally affirmative: not one over [su] life but of [di] life (emphasis in original) (171-172).<sup>75</sup>

Esposito recontextualizes his earlier work on communitas as the basis for an affirmative biopolitics: following his terminology, the term becomes the operator whereby a long-standing immunitary declension of bíos as a form of life can be reversed.<sup>76</sup> He premises such a reading on the belief that contemporary philosophy has fundamentally failed to grasp the relation between Nazi bio-thanatological practices and biopolitics today. "The truth of matter," he writes, is that contemporary philosophy "has simply held that the fall of Nazism would also drag with it into the inferno from which it sprang those

categories that made up its profile."<sup>77</sup> Only by identifying the immunitary apparatus of the Nazi biopolitical machine and then overturning it -- the word Esposito uses is rovesciare, which connotes the act of turning inside out -- can contemporary philosophy come to terms with the fundamental immunitary features of today's global biopolitics and so devise a new lexicon able to confront and alter it.

It's precisely here that Esposito synthesizes Agamben's negative vision of biopolitics with Hardt and Negri's notion of the common as signaling a new affirmative biopolitics. Esposito doesn't offer a simple choice between immunity and community that will once and for all announce the arrival of a new human nature and with it an affirmative biopolitics. The continuum between Nazi and contemporary biopolitics that characterizes Agamben's approach is less significant from this point of view than the continuum of immunity and community. At the risk of reducing Esposito's line of argument, he suggests that if Nazi thanatopolitics is the most radically negative expression of immunization, then inverting the terms, or changing the negative to a positive, might offer contemporary thought a series of possibilities for thinking bíos, a qualified form of life, as the communal form of life. Such a positive conception of biopolitics can only emerge, however, if one simultaneously develops a conception of life that is aporetically exposed to others in such a way that the individual escapes an immunization of the self (and hence is no longer an individual proper).<sup>78</sup> For Esposito it is less a matter of exposure than openness to what is held in common with others.<sup>79</sup> The reader will find much of interest in the way Esposito draws on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, and Deleuze when elaborating such a conception.<sup>80</sup>

The reference to the singular and the common also echoes those pages of Agamben's The Coming Community, especially the sections in which Agamben anchors a nude, exposed life to incommunicability. We recall that the coming community for Agamben begins when a meaningful context for life emerges in which death has meaning, that is when it can be communicated. Only when the previously meaningless and unfelt death of the individual takes on meaning can one speak more properly of singularities without identity who enjoy the possibility of communication. Such a community will consequently be "without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable."<sup>81</sup> So too for Esposito though Bíos doesn't offer much details on the communicative aspects of an affirmative biopolitical community. To find them we need to turn to Communitas, where Esposito links forms of communication to singular lives open to each other in a community. There the differences with Agamben can be reassumed around their respective readings of Heidegger and Bataille. Thus when Agamben emphasizes death as the means by which a life may uncover (or recover) an authentic opening into Dasein, he rehearses those moments of Heidegger's thought that celebrate death as the final horizon of our existence. For Esposito, such a perspective is too limiting for thinking future forms of community. "Death," he writes, glossing Bataille, "is our communal impossibility of being that which we endeavor to remain -- isolated individuals."<sup>82</sup>

In that sense Agamben and Esposito certainly agree on the antinomy between individuals or subjects and community. But for Bataille as for Esposito, the crucial thought for a future community concerns precisely what puts members of the

community outside themselves; not their own death, "since that is inaccessible," but rather "the death of the other."<sup>83</sup> In such a reading, communication occurs when beings lose a part of themselves, the Bataillian rent or a wound, that unites them in communication while separating them from their identity.<sup>84</sup> It is in Bataille's notion of "strong communication" linked to sacrifice that Esposito locates the key for unlocking a contemporary communitas, one in which communication will name "a contagion provoked by the breaking of individual boundaries and by the reciprocal infection of wounds" in a sort of arch-event of contagion and communication.<sup>85</sup> The implicit question for Esposito appears to be how to create conditions in which such a contagion can be contained without involving the entire immunitary machinery. To do so we need to develop a new vocabulary for thinking the boundaries of life and its other, in bio-juridical forms that recognize the one in the other such that "any living being is thought in the unity of life," in a co-belonging of what is different.<sup>86</sup> Essentially then Esposito's emphasis on difference is linked to his larger defense of personal identity throughout Bíos, which is deeply inflected, as the reader will discover, in chapter Three by Esposito's encounter with a hyper-individualistic Nietzsche. This may explain in part his defense of bíos as individuated life as opposed to zoé.

### Birth and Auto-Immunity

Esposito's emphasis on man and his relation to his living being (as opposed to Heidegger's distinction between life and existence) calls to mind other attempts to think non-ontologically the difference between living beings through other perspectives on life. Keith Ansell Pearson's privileging of symbiosis and of inherited bacterial symbionts

is perhaps the most sophisticated, in his attempts to show how "amid cell gorgings and aborted invasions," a reciprocal infection arises such that the bacteria "are reinvigorated by the incorporation of their permanent disease." The human becomes nothing more than a viroid life, "an integrated colony of ameboid beings," not distinct from a larger history of symbiosis that sees germs "not simply as 'disease-causing,' but as 'life-giving' entities."<sup>87</sup> Consequently, anthropocentric readings of human nature will give way to perspectives that no longer focus on one particular species, such as mankind, but rather on those that allow us to think life together across its different forms (biological, social, economic). The reference to disease as life-giving certainly recalls Esposito's own reading of Nietzsche and the category of compensatio in Immunitas as well as Machiavelli's category of productive social conflict, suggesting that some forms of immunity do not necessarily close off access to an authentically political form of life. Indeed reading the immunitary system as only self-destructive fails to see other interpretive perspectives in which immunity doesn't protect by attacking an authentic bíos grounded in a common munus, but rather augments its members' capacity to interact with their environment, so that community can actually be fortified by immunity.

The primary example Esposito offers for such an immunitary opening to community will be found in birth. In Immunitas, Esposito introduces pregnancy as a model for an immunity that augments the ability of the fetus and mother to remain healthy as the pregnancy runs its course. Their interaction takes place, however, in an immunitary framework in which the mother's system of self-defense is reigned in so



that the fetus does not become the object of the mother's own immunization. The immunity system of the mother "immunizes itself against an excess of immunization" thanks to the extraneousness of the fetus to the mother.<sup>88</sup> It isn't that the mother's body fails to attack the fetus -- it does -- but the immunological reaction winds up protecting the fetus and not destroying it. In the example of pregnancy with its productive immunitary features, Esposito finds a suggestive metaphor for an immunity in which the greater the diversity of the other, which would in traditional immunitary terms lead to an all out immunitary struggle against it, is only one possibility. Another is an immunization, which rather than attacking its communal antinomy fortifies it. Bíos as a political form of life, a community, emerges out of an immunization that successfully immunizes itself against attacking what is other, with the result that a more general defense of the system itself, the community, occurs.

This may account for the distance Esposito is willing to travel in awarding birth a political valence. In some of Bíos' most rewarding pages, Esposito suggests that immunization isn't the only category capable of preserving or protecting life from death, but rather that birth, or the continual rebirth of all life in different guises can function similarly. Drawing on Spinoza's theory of life and Gilbert Simondon's reflections on individuation, Esposito extends the category of birth to those moments in which the subject, "moving past one threshold," experiences a new form of individuation. He assumes a stratum of life that all living beings share, a common bíos that is always already political as it is the basis upon which the continued birth of individuation occurs. So doing he elaborates bíos in such a way that zoé will in turn be

inscribed within it: there is no life without individuation through birth. Although Esposito doesn't say so explicitly, the suggestion is that a new affirmative biopolitics might begin by shuffling the terms by which we think of the preservation of life. Life is no longer linked exclusively to those deemed worthy of it along with those who are not, but now comes to mark every form of life that appears thanks to individuation. He writes:

If one notices, life and birth are both the contraries of death -  
- the first synchronically and the second diachronically. The  
only way for life to defer death isn't by preserving itself as  
such, perhaps in the immunitary form of negative  
protection, but rather to be continually reborn in different  
guises.<sup>89</sup>

An ontology of the individual or the subject becomes less a concern than the process of individuation associated with the appearance of life, be it individual or collective. Attempts to immunize life against death give way to strategies that seek to promote new forms of individuation. The emphasis on individuation (and not the individual) allows Esposito to argue that the individual is the subject that produces itself through individuation, which is to say that the individual "cannot be defined outside of the political relationship with those that share the vital experience."<sup>90</sup> So too the collective, which is no longer seen as the "neutralization of individuality" but rather as a more elaborated form of individuation. Rather than limiting bíos to the immunization of life, Esposito imagines an affirmative bíos that privileges those conditions in which life as

manifested across different forms is equipped for individuation. There will be no life that isn't born anew and hence that isn't inscribed in the horizon of bíos. Thus Esposito repositions bíos as the living common to all beings that allows for individuation to take place, not through the notion of a common body -- since that too assumes an immunizing function -- but rather through a bíos that is inscribed in the flesh of the world. Those pages dedicated to Francis Bacon are significant here for Esposito sees in Bacon's paintings not only a reversal of the Nazi biopolitical practice of animalizing man, but also an opening to flesh as describing the condition of the majority of humanity. Or more than an opening to the category of flesh, we might well speak of a non-belonging or an inter-belonging among bodies that makes certain that what is different isn't closed hermetically within but remains in contact with the outside. Essentially Esposito is describing not an exteriorization of the body but rather an internal, even Bataillan rending, that impedes the body's own absolute immanence. It is on the basis of such an apriora that an affirmative biopolitics can begin to be imagined.

### The Biopolitics of Biotechnology

What does the opening to bíos as a political category that humanity shares tell us about that other development that so decidedly marks the current biopolitical moment, namely biotechnology? The question isn't posed in the exchanges between Peter Sloterdijk and Jürgen Habermas (or his stand-ins), precisely on the topic of bio-engineering, which then continued in Ronald Dworkin's rejoinder to Habermas.<sup>91</sup> Missing there is a proper reflection on the role biotechnology plays for contemporary

biopolitics. Esposito's uncovering of the immunitary paradigm in Bíos allows us to see just where biopolitics and the ethical uncertainty surrounding biotechnology might intersect.

Before bringing Esposito's discussion of biopolitics to bear on contemporary reflections of biotechnology though, it will necessary to rehearse the context of the debate that raged around Sloterdijk's essay from 2000 entitled "Regole per il parco umano: Una risposta alla Lettera sull'umanismo di Heidegger." Collected today in a work significantly titled subtitled Non siamo ancora stati salvati, Sloterdijk's discussion of biotechnology pivots around a critique of humanism originating in Heidegger's famous 1946 Lettera sull'umanismo.<sup>92</sup> Sloterdijk's debt to Heidegger surely explains some of the initial reaction in Germany to the unfortunate title "il parco umano," which connoted for some a murderous Nazi thanatopolitics. Seven years since its publication, the essay still troubles, but for reasons different from those offered initially. These concern Sloterdijk's reconfiguration of a human/animal metaphysics as the only means available to construct a "human" life. Interestingly, Sloterdijk's analysis of humanism and his enthusiastic support of bio-engineering begins with a dose of media theory à la Luhmann and Kittler though never openly acknowledged. Essentially, Sloterdijk links humanism to a moment when the book was king, to a periodization of the dominance of the book, which essentially culminated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which then declined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as other media (radio, television, and digital media) come to dominate communication exchanges. Echoing a number of other media theorists who have articulated the capacity of the letter and its extended format in the book to create

"friendship" between an author and his or her reader, Sloterdijk posits a relation between the book as a form of the post -- here the debt Sloterdijk owes Derrida's postcard is clear enough - and the political forms that grew out of the possibility of the posted letter to create links between members of a community such that they become, thanks to the written word, friends of the book. The book, Sloterdijk will say, to the degree it makes such connections possible, is inextricably linked to the project of humanism. The book -- and not just any book, but clearly those books whose philosophical pedigree is determined by the number of friendships created between writer and reader, philosopher and disciple -- names the mode, or if we want, the programming by which a human comes into being. For Sloterdijk the human literally embodies the humanizing connection between author and reader. The exchange of letters, he will go on to say, is the quintessential "inhibiting" medium, since its purpose in creating these connections, these possibilities for sending letters between the two, is precisely to block what is always a possibility for the sender or reader of the letter: to become disinhibited or contaminated by other media which bestialize man and reinforce his fundamentally animalistic nature. In turns illuminating and troubling, Sloterdijk's analysis turns on the assumed animality of man, which is only kept at bay by the capacity of the post to humanize man such that present and future solidarity with the author and his now humanized reader, will inhibit man's animal nature from taking hold, that is from dominating his rational side.

Leaving aside for the moment possible responses to Sloterdijk's melancholy reading of humanism as a form of exchange of letters, what matters for a comparison

with Esposito's biopolitics is the weight Sloterdijk awards such letter writing for producing the human. Sloterdijk sees humanism as the mode by which a medium, the only medium really, reaches the human in the animal man. The importance of reading literature as programming the human will -- we note in passing that philosophy for Sloterdijk is not only a genre of literature but indeed its most important for creating the human -- is precisely to weaken any essential reading of the human as pre-existing; as already given outside of time or difference. With the division of media into humanizing and dehumanizing, Sloterdijk lays the groundwork for bringing together the German Lesen (reading) with Auslesen (selection). Reading in this instance becomes a powerful form of selection. Through the act of reading, certain sections of a collective (we might wish to say community) become more human. With the advent of bio-engineering, however, the human need no longer be programmed indirectly through reading but rather by intervening directly on man's genetic make-up. The difference between the letter and these kinds of interventions is only one of degree for Sloterdijk.

The second point on which we ought to dwell rightly concerns Sloterdijk's appropriation of Heidegger's "Lettera sull'umanismo" since that letter also figures prominently in Esposito's elaboration of bíos. Sloterdijk appears to have appropriated from Heidegger at least initially the notion of an unbridgeable distance, Heidegger will say abyss, between the human who has a world and the animal who is "poor of the world." As the reader will recall, these descriptors of man and animal are the categories around which Heidegger assaults humanism as having undervalued the human in man when humanists repeat incessantly Aristotle's description of man as a rational animal.

For his part Heidegger will elevate the notion of world as the mode by which man exists distinctly apart from the animal. The world doesn't exist for the animal, but names precisely the horizon in which meaning is created by man for existence.

But where one might expect Heidegger to oppose contemporary attempts at bio-engineering on the grounds that it challenges the immeasurable gap between the human and the animal, Sloterdijk countenances the possibility of moving beyond both Heidegger and a failed humanism towards bio-engineering the human so as eventually to diminish the role of inhibiting and disinhibiting media. In a complex series of moves, Sloterdijk pivots from the book as programming the human through the written word via the category of domestication. Domesticating man -- a process Sloterdijk which lays out in detail in another essay collected together with "Regole" entitled "La domesticazione dell'essere: Lo spiegarsi della Lichtung" -- has a long history, one not linked simply to the inhibiting medium of the letter, but one with evolution and the monumental break between sapiens without a home and homo sapiens who represent the first moment of domesticated life. By arguing that bio-engineering as a process is little different from domesticating sapiens, Sloterdijk insists that biotechnology offers a return to an earlier moment of evolution such that a truly posthuman figure will emerge: post-human in the sense that the human is no longer programmed through the medium of the exchange of letters which generate circles of friendship between philosophers and their (human) readers across the centuries, but now through a biological or genetic engineering that will no longer require posted letters to keep the animal at bay. Thus Sloterdijk's emphasis in the essay on the epochal move represented

by the cloning of the sheep Daisy in 1997; for there we find that the proper move from an anthropology of man to an anthropo-technicity was already pre-figured for homo sapiens thousands of years ago.

To what then does the enigmatic "human" park of the title refer? Significantly, it appears to be a reference to Plato and to those sections of Politikos and Politeia in which Plato thinks the human community as a zoological garden, a "biothematic park" we might say, or in a later language a city, making possible what is essentially a zoo-logical politics. Politics for Plato (and implicitly Sloterdijk himself as he is here reading against Heidegger), will consist in devising rules for managing such a park. Who will be the bio-manager of such a park is the most pressing for problem. He writes: "Se tra i guardiani e gli abitanti dello zoo vi e' una differenza di specie, allora gli uni sarebbero cosi' fundamentalmente differenti dagli altri da non ritenersi consigliabile una guida elettiva, ma solo una guida saggia."<sup>93</sup> A difference in species between the zoo-keeper and the animals who reside within the zoo determines who will manage the park. This "guida saggia" will, Sloterdijk continues, impose himself on the flock as he is "piú vicino agli dèi di qui confusi esseri viventi che custodisce."<sup>94</sup> His task? To determine the homeostasis -- the phrase is Sloterdijk's -- who can literally breed two different types of humans: the warrior, on the one hand, and the philosophically-inclined reader of letters on the other. It is the second type, naturally, who will be charged with deciding upon the fate of the human community through his wise bio-management of the human park's stock.



At this point, Sloterdijk turns to Nietzsche, especially the Nietzsche of Zarathustra, and those sections in which Nietzsche argues essentially for the creation of the superman, or what Sloterdijk will ironically gloss as the "superhumanist" creating a heady mix of domesticated humanity and species management. Sloterdijk moves quickly here between Nietzsche, Plato, and bio-engineering as he concludes the essay, but it appears that with the death of "programming" the human through humanist technology, the wise pastor of the flock, the zoo-keeper, withdraws. With this retreat, the end of the humanist exchange of letters is at hand such that the only path available, to the former humanist will be found in biotechnology's capacity to humanize through biological engineering. The wise man gives way to the contemporary version of the bio-manager, the biologist or geneticist, who determines the right mix between the bestial and the human noted above. The overwhelming impression as the essay ends isn't a euphoria for biotechnology but much more a sort of melancholy takes hold during the twilight of humanism.

One final point needs clarification before turning to a comparison with Esposito's understanding of biopolitics and it concerns what some saw as as the deeply troubling similarities between Sloterdijk's theorization of a post-humanism linked to anthropo-techniques used to create and manage human parks and a Nazi thanatopolitics that sent millions to their deaths; based on a positing of a difference of species between those lives worthy and not worthy of living. Defending anthropo-technology as a means of domesticating man through the management of the gene-pool -- which is what Sloterdijk never explicitly states but is where his argument implicitly pushes -- as

well as the approving quotes from Plato in which a different species between guardians or pastors of the flock and the masses or the herd, seemed to many to be come dangerously close to Nazi biopolitics. Sloterdijk anticipates this response, however, by putting forward (or less charitably hiding behind) Heidegger's perspective on fascism. We recall that for Heidegger fascism was a particularly virulent form of "militant humanism" to be placed alongside bolshevism and americanism; Heidegger, according to Sloterdijk's reading saw fascism as "la metafisica della disinibizione, e forse anche una figura disinibente della metafisica." "Per Heidegger," Sloterdijk continues, "il fascismo era la sintesi di umanismo e bestialismo e cioè la paradossale coincidenza di inibizione e disinibizione."<sup>95</sup> Forgetting for the moment the myriad difficulties raised by such distinction, the strategic value for Sloterdijk is clear. Reading fascism as a media theorist might immunizes him from the charge of being in cahoots with a Nazi zoopolitics since for Sloterdijk such a view misses seeing what was really fascism's modus vivendi, namely its capacity to combine humanizing and dehumanizing media in its attempt to construct the new man. The problem with such a perspective is that it fails to register adequately Nazism's biopolitical agenda outside of the media they utilize; in different words, the media theory optic deployed by Sloterdijk and Heidegger is simply too reductive to explain the biological politics of the Nazis.

Much else can be offered by way of introduction to Sloterdijk's perspective on biotechnology and biopolitics -- and in fact a fuller discussion would surely also include his lengthy response to his critics in "La domesticazione dell'essere" -- but the above synthesis is sufficiently detailed so as to allow us to sketch possible areas of contact

between Sloterdijk and Esposito. Let's begin first by noting that both Esposito and Sloterdijk share the premise Heidegger sets out in the Lettera sull'umanismo, namely the the end of philosophy and its transformation into a concern with something called existence or world. For Sloterdijk that movement of philosophy outside of the exchange of letters and later the book, makes Heidegger not only the most formidable critic of humanism but, and this is the key, a privileged predecessor for a certain kind of thinking taking shape today in the relation between the animal and the human. Thus,

Se avessimo voluto parlare ancora una volta, nonostante gli avvertimenti di Heidegger, in termini antropologici, allora avremmo potuto definire gli uomini delle varie epoche storiche come animali, alcuni dei quali sono capaci di leggere e scrivere mentre gli altri no. Da qui c'è un solo passo, anche se impegnativo, per arrivare alla tesi secondo cui gli uomini sono animali, alcuni dei quali allevano i loro simili, mentre gli altri sono allevati.<sup>96</sup>

Today with anthro-techniques, man, according to Sloterdijk, is finally emerging into the properly human, saving him or her from an animalistic dark ages. For Esposito too Heidegger's Lettera sull'umanismo also signals the crucial breaking point in a moment in which posthumanism comes forward. And for Esposito as well the question concerns Heidegger's refusal to subject primary and concrete experience of life to theoretical categories linked to the transcendency of the subject of consciousness. Equally though, another term of Heidegger's, "faktisches Leben," the fact-ness of living, weighs more heavily for Esposito as it names a life that doesn't respond to any external instance "dal

momento che non è ascrivibile ad alcun disegno filosofico precostituito, ciò vuol dire che ad essa e solo ad essa compete la propria decisione di esistenza; a life or a being-  
there that decides for itself and on itself the modality of its own being.<sup>97</sup>

The differences emerge clearly here. Where for Sloterdijk, life up to now has primarily been *zoe*, a *zoe* inflected towards domesticating its own animal nature, for Esposito Heidegger's letter rather opens up the possibility of thinking a life, this "faktisches Leben," through the capacity, immanent to itself not as *zoe* but as *bíos*; as a life "intrinsecamente politica." An opening is created in Heidegger's letter such that the mode of life cannot be reduced to any sort of metaphysics. In other words where Sloterdijk pushes Heidegger's thought forward against what would appear to be Heidegger's own intentions by making bridgeable the distance between the animal and the human through bio-engineering -- Esposito appropriates Heidegger's letter not to authorize bio-engineering in the absence of humanist media, but rather as a lever that lifts the cover on a possible biopolitics whose political connotations cannot be distinguished from the fact that such a life lives.

This admittedly obscure point becomes clearer if we follow the trajectory of the Heideggerean distinction between world and environment in both Sloterdijk and Esposito. For Sloterdijk, world denotes what separates man from the animal; where the animal is chained to its environment, the human being is precisely the one who escapes from the environment, who is able to "irrompere nella dimensione ontologica priva di gabbia, per la quale non riusciamo a trovare nel linguaggio umano una caratterizzazione migliore della parola più banale ... vale a dire l'espressione 'mondo.'"<sup>98</sup>

Thus he understands world more or less as "an environment without limits."<sup>99</sup> This would account for Sloterdijk's approving citations of Uexküll and in particular Rudolf Bilz, who argues that "noi non siamo animali, ma abitiamo in certo qual modo in un animale che vive in comune con i suoi simili e compartecipando gli oggetti."<sup>100</sup>

Prominence again is awarded human life understood as the life associated with that of the animal; where *zoe* will name the life of the animal who lives together with other animals.

Esposito's interest, however, doesn't fall on circumscribing human life to a realm of animalitas, but rather in providing a larger biopolitical context for Heidegger's letter. He does so in two different ways: first he sees the world not merely as the subject of life but also as the object of life. Thus:

Se il fenomeno del vivere si determina sempre come un vivere 'in' o 'per' o 'con' qualcosa che possiamo indicare con il termine 'mondo,' dobbiamo concludere che 'il mondo e' la categoria fondamentale del senso di contenuto inscritto nel fenomeno 'vita.' Il mondo non e' il contenitore, o l'ambiente circostante, ma il contenuto di senso della vita."<sup>101</sup>

Thinking world and life together becomes possible when we recognize that living is always understood as a living in, for, or with something. It is these three prepositions that make the world the sense-giver of life. World is the horizon in which which life is always already *bíos*, where *bíos* is understood fundamentally as a political form of life. It names the ontological horizon of life in which all forms of life are inscribed. Where Sloterdijk orients human life towards its animal other so as to allow in their liminal

mixing a space to appear in which we can see the domestication of the animal into the human, Esposito chooses instead to broaden what was before associated only with the human, namely world, to other life forms that live "in", "for," or with. Although Esposito provides few details on such a living, the implicit assumption is that all forms of life -- not limited to animals but also including vegetative forms of life for instance -- are a part of bíos, to the degree that their environments share contact or common ground with a living in, a living for, and a living with. The point Esposito repeatedly makes by his refusal to discuss specific forms of life is to allow a common understanding or a more general perspective on life as bíos to become visible.

It is this widening of of bíos to all forms of life regardless of their qualification by weakening the boundaries separating world from environment that explains Esposito's other difference with Sloterdijk (as well as with Heidegger himself). For Esposito Heidegger's marked separation of the human from the animal -- where the human "è precisamente il non-animale, così come l'animale è il vivente non-umano" -- is exactly what "viene a separare sempre più netamente la sua filosofia dall'orizzonte del bíos."<sup>102</sup> (171). For Esposito the cause is Heidegger's continued failure to return to the category of "vita fattizia." The result, paradoxically, is that in Heidegger's attempt to keep the human separate from the animal, he risks producing another form of humanism, precisely that humanism that he set out to critique in the Lettera sull'umanismo.

These uses and abuses of Heidegger vis-à-vis the animal appear in a slightly different form when the subject turns to Nazi biopolitics. Sloterdijk's failure to discuss in any detail Nazi biopolitics is especially distressing when we compared to Esposito's

detailed discussion of it in Bíos. Where Sloterdijk only speaks of the Nazis in vitalistic terms as those who mixed humanizing and bestializing media in their search for the new man (juxtaposing Heidegger's own "pathos antivitalistico"), Esposito sees such characterization as too limiting for Nazi biopolitics and indeed our own contemporary biopolitics.<sup>103</sup> The previously mentioned thanatopolitical dispositifs of Nazism that Esposito locates -- "normativizzazione della vita," "doppia chiusura del corpo," and "soppressione anticipata della nascita" -- are recognized as requiring deconstruction. And here we note that the animalization of the human by the Nazis is precisely not the issue. In this regard Esposito raises a crucial objection to those who would see in Nazi biopolitics the slide of the animal into the space where the human once resided. When discussing a 1933 law in which the Nazi state in one of its first "circolare" "proibiva ogni crudeltà nei confronti degli animali, in particolare in riferimento al freddo, al caldo e all'inoculazione di germi patogeni," Esposito notes ironically that "se gli internati nei campi di sterminio fossero stati considerati solo animali, si sarebbero salvati."<sup>104</sup> Making the camp prisoner into an animal cannot account for what the Nazis did on their own murderous terms. What this suggests is that those who would today continue to distinguish the human being as a rational animal as a way of opposing the negative inflection of contemporary thanatopolitics cannot do so successfully as long as they continue, as Sloterdijk among others does, to limit life to merely the animal or to see life simply as animalized zoe and not as a bíos that includes zoe within it.

Moreover, we should be clear that Esposito too draws upon some of the same philosophical sources as Sloterdijk, namely Plato and Nietzsche, but his conclusions are

much less straightforwardly in support of biotechnology. Here I would draw the reader's attention to those sections in which Esposito compiles the thanatopolitical lexicon with which a number of Nazi anthropologists and apologists sought to associate Plato's writings in Politics on breeding and domesticating man to Hitler's own murderous policies. The sheer number of tracts that appeared during the twelve-year Reich that promoted Hitler as a sort of Platonic "guardian" of the German race ought to make us pause and consider whether in fact Sloterdijk's calls for an anthropotechnological use of the human gene pool, or simply bio-engineering as a way of humanizing the animal in man, don't frighteningly mimic an earlier thanatopolitics that was dedicated to protecting and strengthening one form of life over another. In a word, we need to be very careful indeed -- this is Esposito's lesson -- of utilizing Plato as a way of supporting bio-engineering precisely because of how Plato was used in the past in Nazi Germany.

Much the same scruples in appropriating Plato are needed when we turn to Nietzsche. Here too Esposito offers a different perspective on domestication and breeding, one that doesn't emerge only out of Thus Spake Zarathustra. Esposito certainly recognizes the troubling biopolitics at the heart of Nietzsche's thought, the defense of the healthy body from those elements or pathogens that inevitably make it degenerate, and would certainly concur with some of Sloterdijk's reading. Yet, Esposito offers another Nietzsche, one less inclined to breeding, and one more intent on defending the benefits of degeneration. In particular this convalescing Nietzsche is interested in the benefits of illness. According to Esposito's reading, "se la salute non è



piú separabile dalla malattia, se la malattia fa parte della salute, non sarà possibile separare il corpo individuale e sociale secondo linee invalicabili di tipo profilattico e gerarchico" (109). Avoiding degeneration and illness makes it impossible to create conditions for the development and strengthening of life. This more immunitarian Nietzsche ought to be seen together with the Nietzsche's Zarathustra as complicating a strictly one-dimensional use of the philosopher to defend current biotechnological interventions. As I suggest below when discussing Habermas and Dworkin, one might well argue that the immunitary features of biotechnology risk doing precisely the opposite of that which they were intended: to fortify the biological wherewithal of the lives that are the object of such interventions.<sup>105</sup>

#### Habermas, Community, and Biotechniques

Given the significant differences between Sloterdijk and Esposito, we might well expect to see Esposito sharing a number of points of contact with Habermas. That this is not the case requires some explanation. Consider first Habermas' objection that genetic programming, which allows individuals to enhance what they believe to be the desirable features of future offspring, places the future of human nature at risk. Describing a new type of interpersonal relationship "that arises when a person makes an irreversible decision about the natural traits of another person," Habermas argues that our self-understanding as members of the species will be altered when a person or persons can manipulate the genetic basis of life of another; the basis of free societies that are premised on relations "between free and equal human beings" will be undermined.

He adds: "This new type of relationship offends our moral sensibility because it constitutes a foreign body in the legally institutionalized relations of recognition in modern societies."<sup>106</sup> The reference to foreign bodies in new recognition protocols makes it clear that Habermas's language is one largely indebted to the language of immunity. What's more, the impression is that for Habermas symmetrical relations among the members of a group are homologous to the foundation of a moral and ethical community; he assumes something like an unproblematic origin of community that is both the cause and the effect of "human nature." With the genetic manipulation of the human, the development of certain individuals becomes unhinged from their free and unhindered growth. Knowing that others are responsible for who and what they are, alters not only how they see themselves and the kinds of narratives they construct about their individual lives, but also jeopardizes how others will see them (as privileged, as escaping somehow from the natural development of characteristics that occur in interactions with others). These social foundations of society will be irreparably damaged when some members are allowed to intervene genetically in the development of others.

Certainly, Esposito's analysis in Bíos and elsewhere shares a number of features with Habermas's symptomology of a catastrophic neoliberal eugenic regime in which individual choice on future genetic programming operates, in not so different form, to immunize certain individuals from the community. But Esposito parts ways with Habermas in two areas. First by disclosing the negative modality of community in immunity, Esposito deconstructs the transcendental conception of community that for

Habermas is structured by "forms of communication through which we reach an understanding with one another."<sup>107</sup> For Esposito, there is no originary moment of individual self-understanding that brings together subjects to form a community, but rather an impolitical immunitary mechanism operating at the heart of the genesis of community: everyone is joined together in their subtraction from community to the degree the gift of the munus does not belong to the subject. There is "nothing in common" as he titles a chapter in Communitas and hence no self-understanding that can bridge the irreducible difference between subjects. If there is to be a defense of community against the threat of future members whose genetically altered bodies undercut the shared life experiences of all, it cannot be premised on the effects of biotechnology to subtract certain members from the communal giving of the munus. A critique of the dangers of contemporary eugenics based on the threat it raises for the biological conformity of its members runs aground therefore on the impulse to create a transcending norm of biological life.

This by no means precludes a thoroughgoing critique on Esposito's part of the biopolitical lexicon in which neo-liberal eugenic practices are inscribed. Although Esposito in Bíos doesn't discuss current neo-liberal eugenics, certainly genetic programming cannot be thought apart from a history of twentieth-century immunizing biopolitics. Thus in genetic enhancement one observes the domination of the private sphere in questions of public interest, which is captured in the blurring between therapeutic and enhancing interventions. As Esposito shows, such a blurring was already a part of early twentieth-century eugenics beginning in the United States. The

result is that in the realm of biotechnology and genetic engineering, politics continues to center on -- Esposito will say to be crushed by -- the purely biological. But there is more. Neo-liberal eugenics often appears to combine within it the three immunitary procedures sketched above that Esposito locates in a Nazi thantaopolitics. The enormous influence that biologists enjoy today for how individual life may unfold later suggests that the absolute normativization of life has increased exponentially, witnessed in the example with which Esposito opens Bíos of the French child, born with serious genetic lesions, who sued his mother's doctor for a missed diagnosis. One can easily imagine other such cases in the near future in which a failure to intervene genetically might well lead to similar cases against parents or doctors. So too the second immunitary procedure in which the bodies of a future generation of genetically enhanced individuals can be said to belong no longer to themselves, but rather to the individuals who had earlier decided on their genetic make-up. A hereditary patrimony based on the elimination of weaker elements will occur no longer primarily in the West through euthanasia or sterilization, but rather by selecting beforehand the desired characteristics. In this sense, where the bodies of the German people during Nazism were said to belong to the Führer, neo-liberal eugenics disperses the choice to the marketplace and science that together will determine which genetic features are deemed of value. Thus in ever more rapid fashion bio-engineered bodies may be said to belong to the mechanisms of profit and science. So too the anticipatory suppression of birth that now takes place routinely in those instances in which the risk of genetic defects surrounding a birth leads to early termination of the pregnancy. This is not to

say of course that Nazi thanatopolitics and contemporary neo-liberal eugenics are co-terminus for Esposito. In his recent discussion of totalitarianism and biopolitics, Esposito anticipates objections to any kind of superimposition of Nazism and liberalism. He writes:

If for Nazism man is his body and only his body, for liberalism, beginning with Locke, man has a body, which is to say he possesses his body -- and therefore can use it, transform it, and sell it much like an internal slave. In this sense liberalism -- naturally I'm speaking of the category that founds it -- overturns the Nazi perspective, transferring the property of the body from the State to the individual, but on the inside of the same biopolitical lexicon (emphasis in original).<sup>108</sup>

Here Esposito implicitly marks the shared vocabulary of liberalism which collaborates deeply with capitalism and twentieth-century thanatopolitics. Not the double of Nazi biopolitics or its return, but their shared indebtedness to the terms of an immunizing modern biopolitics.

### Dworkin and Life's Norm

The acuteness of Esposito's angle of vision on liberalism also allows us to situate his position with regard to Ronald Dworkin's discussion of abortion, euthanasia, and biotechnology. What we find is a thorough-going deconstruction of the biopolitical and

immunizing features of many of the terms Dworkin employs. To review: in Life's Dominion from 1994, Dworkin speaks of the sacred and inviolable characteristics of "human life" in current debates on euthanasia and abortion in an attempt to undercut any arguments about the fetus as enjoying any intrinsic rights as a person. His argument hinges on a reading of the sacred as embedded in human and artistic creation." He writes:

Our special concern for art and culture reflects the respect in which we hold artistic creation, and our special concern for the survival of animal species reflects a parallel respect for what nature, understood as divine or as secular, has produced. These twin bases of the sacred come together in the case of survival of our own species, because we treat it as crucially important that we survive not only biologically but culturally, that our species not only lives but thrives.<sup>109</sup>

Naturally, the sacred life Dworkin defends is not bíos at all but what he calls subjective life, the "personal value we have in mind when we say that normally a person's life is the most important thing he or she has," which is to say bare life. Such a conflation of bare life and bíos accounts for his failure to think life across different forms; a sacred life is one limited almost entirely to bare life and hence to all the associations that it calls forth.

Not surprisingly, the emphasis he places on artistic and divine creation appears again in his most recent defense of biotechnology. There the inviolability of life is linked

to a defense of biotechnology via the notion of creation. In an essay entitled "Playing God," Dworkin strongly pushes for what appears to be a neo-liberal eugenics program masked by the term "ethic individualism." "There is nothing in itself wrong," he writes, "with the detached ambition to make the lives of future generations of human beings longer and more full of talent and hence achievement." "On the contrary," he continues, "if playing God means struggling to improve our species, bringing into our conscious designs a resolution to improve what God deliberately or nature blindly has evolved over eons, then the first principle of ethical individualism commands that struggle, and its second principle forbids, in the absence of positive evidence of danger, hobbling the scientists and doctors who volunteer to lead it."<sup>110</sup> To the degree the weight we afford human lives is contingent upon a notion of creation, the "playing God" of the title, biotechnology cannot be separated from the implicit sacred nature of created life in all its forms. The emphasis on creation (and not creationism we should be clear) leads Dworkin down the path of a robust defense of biotechnology. Who, the argument runs, would disagree with the implicit desire of the not-yet-born individual to live a longer and more successful life?<sup>111</sup>

Here too Esposito offers a rejoinder. By focusing on the inviolability of individual human life, Dworkin fails to weigh properly the singularity of all life, which is to say that as long as the emphasis is placed on the individual and other traditional forms used to decline the subject, Dworkin's perspective on life is disastrous for any affirmative biopolitics. What's more, in such a scheme, ethic individualism quickly becomes the norm that transcends life; it is a norm of life that limits life to the confines

of an individual subject and individual body; in this it operates, as it has traditionally done, to immunize the community and modernity itself, from the immanence of impersonal, singular life. Such an immanence Esposito anchors to the bíos of communitas; not one based as Dworkin would have it on a community of citizens who "recognize that the community has a communal life," but rather an ecumenical community that runs to all life forms and one that is not always and everywhere transcended by notions of citizenship and individuality.<sup>112</sup> In other words, Dworkin's explicit linking of the "sacred" nature of biotechnology and bare life depends not simply on the function of creation, but more importantly is riven through with a debt owed the notion of the individual. It isn't simply that the government and commerce ought to "fuel, restrain, or shape these developments [in biotechnology]," but rather that life understood as the opening to the impersonal singularity and to the trans- or pre-individual, cannot emerge as the immanent impulse of life as long as the norm of life is only thought in terms of the individual subject.<sup>113</sup> The open question is to what degree the marriage between biotechnology and the individual subject represents a radical jump in quality of the immunizing paradigm. How one answers that will determine the prospects for a coming, affirmative biopolitics.

### A Fortified Bíos?

How then can we set about reversing the current thanatopolitical inflection of biotechnics and biopolitics? Esposito's final answer in Bíos will be found by rethinking precisely the relation between norm and life in opposition to Nazi semantics by



developing another semantics in which no fundamental norm exists from which the others can be derived. This is because "every kind of behavior brings with it the norm that places it on the inside of the more general natural order. That there are as many multiple individuals as infinite modes of substance, will mean that also the norms will be multiplied by a corresponding number."<sup>114</sup> Once the notion of individual no longer marks an individual subject but the process of individuation linked to the birth of all forms of life, our attention will then shift to producing a multiplicity of norms within the sphere of law. The individual will no longer be seen as simply the site in which previous genetic programming is executed, no mere hardware for a genetic software, but instead the space in which individuation takes place thanks to every living forms' interdependence with other living forms. Norms for individuals will give way to individualizing norms that respect the fact that the human body "lives in an infinite series of relations with others."<sup>115</sup> Here as elsewhere Esposito is drawing on Spinoza for his elaboration of a new, non-immunitary semantics of a multiplicity of norms, in which norms cannot be thought outside the "movement of life," one in which the value of every norm is linked to its traducibility from one system to another. The result is the continual deconstruction of any absolute normative system, be it Nazi thanatopolitics or contemporary capitalist bio-engineering of the human. The result is both a defense of difference among life forms and their associated norms as well as an explicit critique of otherness, which for Esposito inevitably calls forth immunization from the implicit threat of contagion and death.<sup>116</sup> The emphasis on difference (and not otherness) among life forms in the closing pages of Bíos is linked to change, which Esposito sees not only

as a prerogative of the living, but as the basis for elaborating a radical tolerance towards a world understood as a multiplicity of different living forms.

The question, finally, is how to fortify a life's opening to other lives without at the same time inscribing it in an immunitary paradigm. For Esposito the answer, as I suggested in earlier when addressing Dworkin's neo-liberal perspective on biotechnology, lies in destabilizing the absolute immanence of the individual life by foregoing an emphasis on the individual life in favor of an "indefinite life." The reference to Deleuze's last essay, "Pure Immanence," allows Esposito to counterpose the absolute immanence of individual life to the absolute singularity of a "life." The relevant quote from Deleuze merits citation again:

The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a "Homo tantum" with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral beyond good and evil, for it was only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things that made it good or bad. The life of such an individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name,

though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence,  
a life.<sup>117</sup>

Esposito's excursus on flesh and individuating birth attempt to articulate the necessary conditions in which the characteristics of just such a singular homo tantum can be actualized; implicit in the figure of the homo tantum is a "norm of life that doesn't subject life to the transcendence of the norm, but makes the norm the immanent impulse of life."<sup>118</sup> If we were to express such a figure biopolitically, the category of bíos will name the biopolitical thought that is able to think life across all its manifestations or forms as a unity. There is no zoé that can be separated from bíos since "every life is form of life and every form is to be referred to life."<sup>119</sup> Esposito here translates Deleuze's singular life as the reversal of the thanatopolitics he sees underpinning the Nazi normative project in which some lives were not considered forms and hence closed off from bíos. The opening to an affirmative biopolitics takes place precisely when we recognize that harming one part of life or one life harms all lives. The radical toleration of life forms that epitomizes Esposito's reading of contemporary biopolitics is therefore based on the conviction that every life is inscribed in bíos.

No greater obstacle to fortifying bíos exists today than those biopolitical practices that separate out zoé from bíos, practices that go hand in hand with the workings of the immunitary paradigm. Esposito seems to be suggesting that our opening to an affirmative biopolitics becomes thinkable only when a certain moment has been reached when a philosophy of life appears possible in the folds of an ontology of death; when the immunitary mechanisms of the twenty-first century reach the point of no return. In

such an event, when the immunitary apparatus attacks bíos by producing zoé, a space opens in which it becomes possible to posit bíos as not in opposition to zoé but as its ultimate horizon. Thus the subject of Bíos is life at the beginning of the twenty-first century, its fortunes inextricably joined to an ductile immunitary mechanism five hundred years or so in operation. Five hundred years is a long time but the conditions, Esposito argues, may be right for a fundamental and long overdue re-articulation or reinscription of bíos in a still to be completed political lexicon that is radically humanistic to the degree that there can be no zoé that isn't already bíos. One of the shorthands Esposito offers us in Bíos for thinking the difference will be found in the juxtaposition between a "politics of mastery and the negation of life" and another future, affirmative politics of life.<sup>120</sup>

### Life as Bíos

With this survey of Roberto Esposito's affirmative biopolitics complete, I want in the pages that remain to reflect further on the stakes his genealogy of an immunity mechanism in the heart of modern biopolitics raises. First the opening to community that Esposito posits cannot in any way be used as a call, a melancholic call, for a new form of communitarianism, be it of the local or of the global variety. It isn't simply that community is inoperative as Nancy notes in his famous essay of the same name, but that communities as derived from communitas cannot be thought apart from their mode of immunization; indeed community names simultaneously the opening and closing of ensembles of lives, since what they share is precisely the munus that they

give but cannot receive. But rather than viewing this as Esposito translating inoperativity from Nancy into impossibility, we might instead choose to see Esposito as reterritorializing the borders of bíos. This reterritorialization becomes possible once the crises in immunity (and hence the crises in community) allows us to see just how limited and limiting our previous perspective on community was. We might say that Esposito discloses the mode by which every community is always already biopolitical to the degree it immunizes itself from greater interaction, such that the common cannot simply name what members of a community share but what they cannot give as individuals.

How might Esposito's analysis be formulated in light of globalization, or its often accompanied synonym neo-liberalism? Esposito suggests that the crises in immunity has reached such proportions thanks to the weakening of national sovereignty (although Esposito never actually speaks of the state per se except as a form of immunization -- clearly there are others). What is required it would seem in a global context is to see this weakening of immunity as an occasion for thinking a different modality of immunity, one based on reversing the intensely immunitarian dispositifs that characterize contemporary biopolitics. For some like Sloterdijk, the flip side of such a irreversible weakening of "collettivi politici finalizzati alla sicurezza in gruppi " in "società globalizzanti" has been taken up with "un design immunitario individualistico": individuals break off from their collective bodies in order to pursue happiness, following in a word the American model.<sup>121</sup> The problem of course with such a perspective is that in the search for new immunitarian designs, Sloterdijk and others

don't countenance an immunity for all societies nor for everyone.<sup>122</sup> Immunity seemingly can never be granted to everyone.

This search for and justification of individual immunitary designs that cannot hope to be extended to all forms of life is synonymous in many quarters with a neo-liberalist agenda; the dismantling of state and public immunitary apparatuses in favor of private, corporate, and individual immunities that by definition are intended to weaken an organic connection between a territory and those who inhabit it. The care with which Esposito uncovers the details of the immunitary mechanism within community, indicate that globalization (or perhaps better, neo-liberalist designs on globalization) continues to deploy the dispositifs of a centuries-old immunitary mechanism, perhaps more accelerated but nonetheless little different from liberalism's emphasis on the individual, property, and of course liberty that appear in Esposito's analysis of immunity and liberalism. Immunity in its classic dispositifs of liberalism now updated into neo-liberalism isn't countenanced as extendable to all forms of life; these designs are premised in fact on the exclusion of some forms of life from immunity due to economic calculations. In that sense neo-liberalism operates both as a cover for an immunitary regime extended globally, as well as a kind of imaginary in which individual designs of immunity, and the freeing of vital energies, are used to justify denying immunity to whole populations, to the poor, to immigrants, etc.

Esposito suggests that neo-liberalism in fact doesn't just simply weaken the border between territories and inhabitants, but also raises at the same time walls between one form of life and another; not a ecumenical and impersonal bíos is

produced, but a bíos that is confined to certain forms of life that are able to construct or form their own individual immunitary apparatus. Achille Mbembe in "On the Postcolony" notes how whole swaths of the African continent have become zones of weakened or non-existent immunity, which he adds doesn't translate into an authentic opening to community. That too is the other side of a neo-liberal ideology: to promote ethnic imaginaries and identities in communitarian forms as a result of market forces, the famous thinking the global through the local. What instead comes into being in Africa as well as in other regions of the world are communities placed in danger precisely because they lack an immunitary regime that is capable of protecting them and their members from external threats of plunder and expropriation; homologies for neo-liberal biopower.

In Communitas, Immunitas, and now Bíos and Terza Persona, Esposito dispels the mists surrounding the immunitary and communitary effects of the neo-liberal agenda. What is needed is a radical deconstruction of immunity in its present form, alongside if not an outright dismantling of the immunitary dispositifs of liberalism, then an opening in which it becomes possible to see how bíos has been hijacked by these dispositifs. The last chapter of Bíos sets out a number of perspectives for loosening the hold immunity has on the modern imagination, be it of the liberal or neo-liberal derivation. Of particular importance is thinking through a normative subject that is subject to a norm of life that has at its core "l'impulso immanente della vita."<sup>123</sup> Here we note how neo-liberalism continues to subject life to a transcendent norm, namely the norm of the productive and vital individual who is capable of designing his or her own

immunization. One of the principal tasks of political philosophy is to register how damaging to life such a limited notion of bíos is. This is not to say by any means that neo-liberalism re-enacts the thanatopolitics of Nazism nor that neo-liberalism creates lives unworthy of living to the degree Nazism did. What my reading of Esposito suggests, however, is that neo-liberalism has picked up where liberalism left off -- by heightening the culture of the individual so as to create swaths of non-immunity outside the territorial confines of community. These lives, left to their immunitary devices in the context of weakened national or state immunity apparatuses, can be abandoned socially. This is the ultimate sense of Esposito's elaboration of a politics of life as opposed to a politics over life, an affirmative biopolitics that can arise from a clear understanding of the immunized community and its centuries-long production of a limited and limiting norm of what qualifies as life.



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<sup>1</sup> Niklas Luhmann, Social Systems, translated by John Bednarz, Jr. with Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Donna Haraway, "Biopolitics and Postmodern Bodies" in Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1991): 203-230; and Jean Baudrillard, The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena (New York: Verso, 1991), 85. Compare as well Robert Unger's discussion and problematization of "immunity rights" and radical democracy in False Necessity: Anti-Necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 513-517; 530. My thanks to Adam Sitze for drawing my attention to Unger's important contribution to immunity theory.

<sup>2</sup> Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, Biopolitics (Brookfield: Aldershot, 1994); Agnes Heller and Sonja Puntsher Riekman, eds., The Politics of the Body, Race, and Nature (Averbury: Aldershot, 1996); and Theory of Modernity (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999). For Mark C. Taylor, see Notes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) as well as Hiding (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of Religion," in On Religion, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); The Politics of Friendship, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997); "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides," in Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, ed. Giovanna Borradori,

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Rogues: Two Essays on Reason (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003). See also his lectures from 1978-1979, collected in Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au collège de France (1978-1979), sous la direction de Alessandro Fontana (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999); and The Open: Man and Animal, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) and Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> See in this regard Esposito's earlier works on political philosophy: Vico e Rousseau e il moderno Stato borghese (Bari: De Donato, 1976); La politica e la storia : Machiavelli e Vico (Napoli: Liguori, 1980); Ordine e conflitto: Machiavelli e la letteratura politica del Rinascimento italiano (Napoli: Liguori, 1984); Categorie dell'impolitico (Bologna: Il

Mulino, 1988); Nove pensieri sulla politica (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993); and L'origine della politica : Hannah Arendt o Simone Weil? (Rome: Donzelli, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (London: Verso, 2004) and Giving an Account of Oneself: A Critique of Ethical Violence (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Keith Ansell-Pearson, The Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nietzsche and the Transhuman Condition (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Germinal Life: The Difference and Repetition of Deleuze (New York: Routledge, 2000); Jürgen Habermas, The Future of Human Nature (London: Polity Press, 2004); and Ronald Dworkin, Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom (London: Vintage, 1994) as well as Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche, Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Leben: ihr Mass und ihre Form (Leipzig, 1920). Selections from the work were translated into English in 1992. See "Permitting the Destruction of Unworthy Life," in Law and Medicine 8 (1994): 231-265.

<sup>10</sup> Esposito, Communitas, xii.

<sup>11</sup> Emile Benveniste, Indo-European Language and Society, trans. by Elizabeth Palmer (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1973) and Marcel Mauss, The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies, trans. W.D. Hall (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Communitas, xiii.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the chapter in Communitas dedicated to guilt: "Community is defineable only on the basis of the lack from which it derives and that inevitably connotes it precisely as an absence or defect of community" (33).

<sup>15</sup> Bíos, 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> What Esposito has done, it seems to me, is to have to draw on Nancy's arguments in The Inoperative Community regarding precisely the excessive nature of community vis-à-vis the metaphysical subject. Nancy writes that "community does not weave a superior, immortal, or transmortal life between subjects ... but it is constitutively, to the extent that it is a matter of 'constitution' here, calibrated on the death of those whom we call, perhaps, wrongly, its 'members' (inasmuch as it is not a question of organism)." Esposito demonstrates instead that the calibration of which Nancy speaks doesn't just involve the future deaths of the community's "members," but also revolves around the mortal threat that the other members represent for each other. It is precisely this threat and the calls for immunization from it that explain why so many have in fact made the question of community "a question of organism." Or better, it is precisely the

unreflected nature of community as organism that requires deconstruction. Only in this way will the biopolitical origins of community be made clear via community's aporia in immunity (Jean Luc Nancy, The Inoperative Community, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simone Sawhney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 14).

<sup>20</sup> Bíos, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Rossella Bonito Oliva's analysis of the immunization paradigm is apropos: "The route of a mature modernity unbinds the originarity of the relation [between zoon and the political] and makes immanent the reasons of living with [cum-vivere], which is always assumed as a subsequent and therapeutic step for the condition of solitude and the insecurity of the individual." "From the Immune Community to the Communitarian Immunity: On the Recent Reflections of Roberto Esposito," Diacritics, trans. Timothy Campbell.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality, ed. Graham Burcell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 103.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, "Society Must be Defended," 253.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, Precarious Life, 24. See as well Butler's discussion of the opacity of the subject: "The opacity of the subject may be a consequence of its being conceived as a relational being, one whose early and primary relations are not always available to conscious

knowledge. Moments of unknowingness about oneself tend to emerge in the context of relations to others, suggesting that these relations call upon primary forms of relationality that are not always available to explicit and reflective thematization" (Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself, 20).

<sup>25</sup> Butler, Precarious Life, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Butler does come close to Esposito's position when describing the violent, self-centered subject: "Its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multilateral relations ... It shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features 'other to' itself" (Butler, Precarious Life, 41).

<sup>27</sup> Roberto Esposito, "Introduzione: termini della politica," Oltra la politica: antologia dell'impolitico (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1996), 1. Lest I appear to reduce their respective positions to a Hobbesian declension of biopolitics in Esposito and a Hegelian search for recognition in subject positions in Butler, each does recognize the need to muster some sort of new understanding of the changing conditions of what qualifies as life. For Butler that search is premised on the need to enlarge "the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved"; hence the importance she places on narratives of multilateralism and changing the normative

schemes of what is or isn't human proffered by the media (Butler, Precarious Life, xiv). For his part, Esposito chooses to focus on the process of individualization that occurs at both the individual and collective level, arguing that "if the subject is always thought inside the form of bíos, bíos in turn is inscribed in the horizon of a cum [with] that makes it one with the being of man" (Bíos, 199). The title Bíos comes into its own here as a term that marks the vital experiences that the individualized subject shares and has "in common" politically with others. Esposito's excursus on life as a form of birth that he elaborates in the fifth chapter may in fact be read as a necessary preface for the kind of changed recognition protocols related to grieving that Butler herself is seeking.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," 44.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Cfr. in this regard the pages Foucault devotes to the theme in The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-82, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2005): 120-1; 182-185. My thanks to Adam Sitze for pointing out the important connections between biopolitics and these later seminars.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. In this regard see A.J.P. Thomson's recent "What's to Become of "Democracy to Come?," Postmodern Culture 15:3 (May 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, The Politics of Friendship, 35.

<sup>34</sup> "Thus Deleuze's ultimate response to Hegel's argument against the 'richness' of immediacy is that the significance of the singular -- 'this,' 'here,' 'now' -- is only grasped within the context of a problem, a 'drama' of thought that gives it sense, in the absence of which it is effectively impoverished." Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts, ed. Charles J. Stivale (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 47.

<sup>35</sup> Derrida, Rogues, 33.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides," 95.

<sup>39</sup> With that said, it is also true that with a different set of texts in hand a more "commun-ist" reading of Derrida emerges, namely Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) as well as Derrida's later texts on hospitality, in particular On Hospitality, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Hent de Vries analyzes Derridean thought and hospitality as well in the last chapter of his Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> Bíos, 170.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.



<sup>42</sup> See Andrea Cavalletti's recent La città biopolitica, where he implicitly invokes the life of the city as one requiring protection (Andrea Cavalletti, La città biopolitica: mitologie della sicurezza (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2005), esp. 20-27). See as well my interview with Esposito in Diacritics.

<sup>43</sup> See too the recent, brilliant contributions of Simona Forti to discussions of biopolitics originating in Italy. In addition to her groundbreaking work from 2001 entitled Totalitarismo (Rome: Laterza, 2001), her stunning "The Biopolitics of Souls: Racism, Nazism, and Plato" recently appeared in English (Political Theory 34, no. 1 (February 2006): 9-32). There she examines "the ambivalences that connect some of the assumptions of our philosophical tradition to Nazi totalitarianism" (10).

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, 246-247.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>49</sup> See especially Paolo Virno, The Grammar of the Multitude, trans. Isabella Bertolotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004); Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics, eds. Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winckler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Lessico di biopolitica, eds. Renata Brandimarte,

Patricia Chiantera-Stutte, et. al (Roma: Manifestolibri, 2006); and Antonella Cutro, Biopolitica: storia e attualità di un concetto (Verona: Ombre Corte 2005).

<sup>50</sup> Agamben, Homo Sacer, 1.

<sup>51</sup> On this note see Laurent Dubreuil's "Leaving Politics: Bíos, Zoé, Life," forthcoming in Diacritics.

<sup>52</sup> Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985). Agamben discusses at length the relation among Schmitt, Benjamin, and the state of exception in State of Exception, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> Agamben, Homo Sacer, 7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 174. In this sense I agree with Eric Vogt's view that Agamben "corrects" Foucault's analysis. See his recent "S/Citing the Camp," in Politics, Metaphysics and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 74-101.

<sup>56</sup> Agamben does take up his analysis of modern biopolitics in The Open, where what he calls the anthropological machine begins producing "the state of exception" so as to determine the threshold between the human and the inhuman. Yet to the degree the optic moves along the horizon of the state of exception, modernity and with it a nineteenth-century anthropological discourse remain wedded to a political (and

metaphysical) aporia. "Indeed, precisely because the human is already presupposed every time, the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside." Giorgio Agamben, The Open, 37.

<sup>57</sup> Marco Revelli, La politica perduta (Torino: Einaudi, 2003).

<sup>58</sup> Hardt and Negri, Empire, 421.

<sup>59</sup> See Paolo Virno's previously cited Grammar of the Multitude as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's edited collection of essays on Italian radical thought Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Hardt and Negri, Multitude, 348.

<sup>61</sup> Certainly the Deleuzian optic is crucial in accounting for Hardt and Negri's affirmative vision of biopolitics as they themselves readily admit. A new sense of the communal based on the multitude and cooperation makes clear the illusory nature of modern sovereignty. See in this regard Negri's Kairòs, alma venus, multitudo: nove lezioni impartite a me stesso (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2000): "The teleology of the common, inasmuch as it is the motor of the ontological transformation of the world cannot be subjected to the theory of sovereign mediation. Sovereign mediation is always in fact the foundation of a unit of measure, while ontological transformation has no measure." (127).

<sup>62</sup> Hardt and Negri, Multitude, 206.

<sup>63</sup> In a recent essay, Esposito pushes his reading of Foucault to a global re-evaluation of the term totalitarianism. "Recognizing the attempt in Nazism, the only kind of its genre, to liberate the natural features of existence from their historical peculiarity, means reversing the Arendtian thesis of the totalitarian superimposition between philosophy of nature and philosophy of history. Indeed it means distinguishing the blind spot in their inassimiliability and therefore in the philosophical impracticability of the notion of totalitarianism." Roberto Esposito, "Totalitarismo o biopolitica: per un'interpretazione filosofica del Novecento," Micromega 5 (2006): 62-63.

<sup>64</sup> Bíos, 45.

<sup>65</sup> We ought to note that much of Esposito's critique of Foucault also holds true for Agamben. But where Foucault links socialism to Nazism via racism, Agamben joins a Nazi biopolitics to modern democracies through the state of exception. The result is, however, the same: to highlight Nazism's shared biopolitical features with contemporary democracies and so to lessen its singularity.

<sup>66</sup> In this regard, see the entry for sovereignty in Esposito's Nove pensieri sulla politica (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), 87-111.

<sup>67</sup> "One can speak of the Nazi state as a 'biocracy.' The model here is a theocracy, a system of rule by priests of a sacred order under the claim of divine prerogative. In the case of the Nazi biocracy, the divine prerogative was that of cure through purification

and revitalization of the Aryan race." Lifton goes on to speak of biological activism in the murderous ecology of Auschwitz, which leads him to the conclusion that the "Nazi vision of therapy" cannot be understood apart from mass murder. (Robert Jay Lifton, The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 17; 18).

<sup>68</sup> Bíos, 117. In Immunitas Esposito makes explicit his attempt to fold the notion of exception into that of immunization. Alluding to Agamben, Esposito notes that "the irreducibly antinomical structure of the nómos basileús -- founded on the interiorization or better the 'internment' of an exteriority -- is especially evident in the case of exception that Carl Schmitt situates in the 'most external sphere' of law" (37). Here Esposito attempts to think immunity through a Benjaminian reading of law and violence, but elsewhere he notes that such a method is in fact Batallian. See his Categorie dell'impolitico for the debt such a methodology owes George Bataille and the term partage, or the liminal co-presence of separation and concatenation (Esposito, Categorie dell'impolitico, xxii).

<sup>69</sup> Bíos, 56.

<sup>70</sup> See in particular the 2001 roundtable discussion among Esposito, Negri and Vaca ("Dialogo sull'impero e democrazia," Micromega 5 (2001): 115-134, as well as Esposito's recent elaboration of biopolitical democracy ("Totalitarismo o biopolitica: per un'interpretazione filosofica del Novecento," Micromega 5 (2006): 57-66).

<sup>71</sup> Hardt and Negri, Multitude, 206.

<sup>72</sup> "Interview with Roberto Esposito," Diacritics. With more time, it would be of great interest to trace how Esposito's early work on the Italian avant-garde informs his later reflections on immunity and biopolitics. See in this regard his analysis of the poetry of Nanni Balestrini in Ideologia della neo avanguardia (Napoli: Liguori, 1976) and the resemblance between communitas as a vital sphere with that of Balestrini's poetics.

<sup>73</sup> Hardt and Negri, Multitude, 356. But we shouldn't assume that the contact implicit in a network doesn't risk precisely the kind of auto-immunitary deficiencies that Baudrillard for instance sees as the principle feature of current politics. He writes "All integrated and hyperintegrated systems -- the technological system, the social system, even thought itself in artificial intelligence, and its derivatives -- tend towards the extreme constituted by immunodeficiency. Seeking to eliminate all external aggression, they secrete their own internal virulence, their own malignant reversibility" (Jean Baudrillard, "Prophylaxis and Virulence," 62).

<sup>74</sup> Bíos, 65.

<sup>75</sup> Bíos, 171-172.

<sup>76</sup> What he will later say about Deleuze's final text, "Pure Immanence: A Life ...," is a shorthand for his own analysis: "bíos is inscribed in the question of communitas and viceversa." (Bíos, 212).

<sup>77</sup> Bíos, 161.

<sup>78</sup> In this sense Esposito's conception of biopolitics differs from Donna Haraway's. Haraway, we recall, leans directly on the immunitary paradigm as a model for interaction. If she doesn't sing its praises, she does recognize in it the postmodern mode by which "the semi-permeable self [is] able to engage with others (human and non-human, inner and outer), but always with finite consequences" (Haraway, "Postmodern Bodies," 225). Significantly these include "situated possibilities and impossibilities of individuation and identification; and of partial fusions and dangers." In short only when immunized is every member capable of interacting with every other. Bíos moves the accent off of the individual and the body, the individual body, to a notion of life, one that cannot be traced back to an specific individual but rather to the dynamic motor of the virtual and the singularities that precede the genesis of individual selves. In other words, to communitas as the pre-individualizing mode of having and being in common.

<sup>79</sup> More similarities between Butler and Esposito's reading of the subject emerge here. "Do we want to say that it is our status as 'subjects' that binds us all together even though, for many of us, the 'subject' is multiple or fractured? And does the insistence on the subject as a precondition of political agency not erase the more fundamental modes of dependency that do bind us and out of which emerge our thinking and affiliation, the basis of our vulnerability, affiliation, and collective resistance?" (Butler, Precarious Life, 49).

<sup>80</sup> Of particular importance for Esposito is the category of flesh appropriated from Merleau-Ponty, and its usefulness for scrambling and eliding previously inscribed immunitary borders. Flesh, for Esposito, offers the possibility of thinking a politicization of life that doesn't move through a semantics of the body, as flesh refers to a "worldly material that is antecedent or successive to the constitution of the subject of law" (Bíos, 182). The distinctively anti-immunitary features of flesh make it possible to countenance the "eclipse of the political body," and with it the emergence of a different form of community in which contagious exposure to others gives way to constitutive openness. Flesh will then name what is common to all, a being that is "singular and common" (Bíos, 182).

<sup>81</sup> Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 64.

<sup>82</sup> Communitas, 139. In this regard, see Adriana Caverero's compelling reading of speech and politics in the thought of Hannah Arendt, to which Esposito's understanding of the relation between community and communication is indebted: "According to her [Arendt], speech -- even it is understood as phone semantike -- does not become political by way of the things of the community that speech is able to designate. Rather, speech becomes political on account of the self-revelation of speakers who express and communicate their uniqueness through speaking -- no matter the specific content of what is said. The political valence of signifying is thus shifted from



speech -- and from language as a system of signification -- to the speaker" (Adriana Cavarero, For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 190. For the relation Bataille draws between the individual and communication see his On Nietzsche, trans. Bruce Boone (New York: Paragon, 1992), esp. 18-19.

<sup>83</sup> Cfr. Judith Butler's gloss of Laplace's "Responsibility and Response" in Giving an Account of Oneself: "The other, we might say, comes first, and this means that there is no reference to one's own death that is not at once a reference to the death of the other" (75).

<sup>84</sup> George Bataille, "The College of Sociology," Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939, trans. Alan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 251.

<sup>85</sup> Communitas, 142.

<sup>86</sup> Bíos, 215.

<sup>87</sup> Pearson, Viroid Life, 182; 189.

<sup>88</sup> Immunitas, 205.

<sup>89</sup> Bíos, 199.

<sup>90</sup> Bíos, 145.

<sup>91</sup> See Andrew Fischer's helpful summary of the debate, "Flirting with Fascism: "The Sloterdijk Debate," in Radical Philosophy 9 (January/February 2000): 20-33.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, Non siamo ancora stati salvati: Saggi dopo Heidegger (Milano: Studi Bompiani, 2004).

<sup>93</sup> Sloterdijk, "Regole per il parco umano," 262.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>97</sup> Bíos, 166.

<sup>98</sup> Sloterdijk, "Domesticazione dell'essere," 128.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>101</sup> Bíos, 166-167.

<sup>102</sup> Bíos, 170; 171.

<sup>103</sup> Sloterdijk, "Regole," 249.

<sup>104</sup> Bíos, 139.

<sup>105</sup> With that said, I would be amiss if I didn't note in his more recent writings, Sloterdijk does offer a model of immunity thought through the category of spheres that shares a number of areas of contact with Esposito. See in particular the chapter entitled ""Trasformazione immunologica: verso 'società' dalle pareti sottili" in Il mondo dentro il capitale, a cura di Gianluca Ronaiuti (Roma: Meltemi, 2006).

<sup>106</sup> Bíos, 14.

<sup>107</sup> Bíos, 10.

<sup>108</sup> Esposito, "Totalitarismo o biopolítica," 63-64.

<sup>109</sup> Dworkin, Life's Domain, 76-77.

<sup>110</sup> Dworkin, "Playing God," in Sovereign Virtue, 452.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>112</sup> Dworkin, "Liberal Community," in Sovereign Virtue, 227.

<sup>113</sup> Dworkin, "Playing God," 452.

<sup>114</sup> Bíos, 206.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Esposito's reading of Gehlen in Immunitas: "For Gehlen, the other, more than an alter ego or a different subject is essentially and above all else a non-ego; the 'non' that allows the ego to identify with the one who is precisely other from his own other" (123).

<sup>117</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 28-29.

<sup>118</sup> Bíos, 214.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>120</sup> I wish to thank Miguel Vatter for the terminology. For a discussion of the difference between biopower and biopolitics, which seems to me implicit in the above distinction, see Maurizio Lazzarato, "From Biopower to Biopolitics," available at <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcbiopolitics.htm> [accessed 26 November 2006]:

"Foucault's work ought to be continued upon this fractured line between resistance and creation. Foucault's itinerary allows us to conceive the reversal of biopower into biopolitics, the 'art of governance' into the production and government of new forms of life. To establish a conceptual and political distinction between biopower and biopolitics is to move in step with Foucault's thinking."

<sup>121</sup> Sloterdijk, "Trasformazione immunologica," 200.

<sup>122</sup> As Sloterdijk recently writes, immunity "non avverà in tutte e non varrà per tutti" ("Trasformazione immunologica," 201).

<sup>123</sup> Bíos, 210.