

BETWEEN BIOS AND ETHOS: A COMMON GROUND BEYOND LIFE

Review of Ottavio Marzocca's *Biopolitics for Beginners*

Paolo Castoro

(paolo.castoro@virgilio.it)

«The writing of this book began in one era and ended in another». These are the opening words of Ottavio Marzocca's latest work: *Biopolitics for Beginners: Knowledge of Life and Government of People* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2020). This book, written for an international audience, aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the reflection on biopolitics: «Hence also the title of the book, which leaves the reader the faculty to consider it modest or ambitious, ironic or serious» (p. 12). While its writing started in a time not yet disrupted by the pandemic, it is in light of that event that this work clearly shows its relevance and value.

After almost three decades of fruitful debates, the discussion on biopolitics seemed indeed to have run its course; this is despite the fact that the historical emergence of biopower is undoubtedly a crucial event of modern politics, connected with numerous phenomena in today's world, from the crisis of the welfare state to the ecological crisis. The pandemic – and the health crisis it caused – proved however that the problem of the relationship between life and political power in a globalized world, far from being behind us, is more alive and pressing than ever. It is also a problem – as the book illustrates – closely intertwined with a series of unresolved issues of the Modern Age: from the economization of politics to the vanishing of life in common, from man's position in the world to the broken bond with the environment.

Since the first pages of this book, it is possible to notice a special ambition to reconstruct not only the evolution of the research on biopolitics, but the entire history of biopower itself, framing it within the wider context of the power practices that, since the Modern Age, have been “governing” our lives. The debate on biopolitics thus becomes the starting point of an analysis which – building upon reflections and studies carried out by Marzocca in previous works¹ – lays out a thorough genealogy of modern power aimed to bring to light its effects on the individual and collective *ethos*.

In this sense, one cannot help «starting again from Foucault» – as stated in the subtitle of the first chapter: he who fully investigated biopower, unveiling both its relevance and its connections with other forms of government of society and with economic rationality.

It is from Foucault, indeed, that scholars and thinkers “started again” in the nineties, when the topic of biopolitics started appearing in the works of various authors. At the origin of this

¹ Ottavio Marzocca, *Il governo dell'ethos. La produzione politica dell'agire economico* (Milano: Mimesis, 2011); Id., *Foucault ingovernabile. Dal bios all'ethos* (Milano: Meltemi 2017); Id., *Il mondo comune. Dalla virtualità alla cura* (Roma: manifestolibri, 2019).

rediscovery is the first release in 1997 in France – after a first, unauthorized 1990 Italian edition – of “*Society Must Be Defended*”², the course held in 1976 at the *Collège de France* in which the French philosopher delved deeper into the theme of biopolitics presented that same year in *The Will to Knowledge*³. In that text, Foucault highlights in a particularly effective way that since the 18th century a new power, which cannot be linked to the juridical power of sovereignty, has started investing the life of the *population* understood as a biological species. A power which according to the French thinker has its roots in the medicalization of society established between the 18th and the 19th century; a power which, in its most extreme version, can lead to forms of “state racism” such as Nazism and (to a lesser extent) Soviet Socialism, or even – as noted by Marzocca – such as the inter-ethnic wars taking place during the same years of the rediscovery of the Foucauldian thought on biopolitics, when many independent states were born as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union (pp. 37-38).

That on which Marzocca focuses his attention, however, is the connection of this type of power with a wider set of political practices of the Modern Age referred to by Foucault as “governmentality”. This set of practices was modeled on those of pastoral power belonging to Jewish tradition but brought to perfection by the Christian pastorate through the spiritual direction of souls. Such a model does not have as its goal the conquest and possession of a land, but rather the government of a multiplicity of men: a “flock” guided by the shepherd towards the salvation of the whole group and of every single sheep at the same time.

It is against the background of modern governmentality that, in Foucault’s view, the “population” emerges as the object of political power: that is, a natural subject that has its specific spatiality in the *milieu*, the environmental framework of its life conditions. The goal in this context is to govern phenomena linked to the circulation of people and goods – from the scarcity of cereals to epidemics and issues related to health and public hygiene –, in such a way as to guarantee the “naturalness” and “spontaneity” of their orientation towards “normality”. The emergence of this concern also corresponds to that of liberalism, as a form of governmentality in which political economy establishes itself as the fundamental knowledge of political action, acquiring its epistemic autonomy with the aim of promoting the freedom of individual economic initiative from public power (pp. 65-84).

Marzocca’s analysis, which is especially focused on the relationship between liberal freedom and biopower’s “security mechanisms”, is developed in various chapters on the basis of the following assumption: it is within the context of economic governmentality, and specifically that of liberalism, that biopolitics needs to be studied. This is a fundamental point in Foucault’s thought, whose greatest merit is that of «contextualizing biopolitics itself within the framework of the hegemony that economic rationality exercises on the ways of governing modern societies. This connection (...) is decisive to avoid transforming biopolitics into a sort of metastorical concept» (p. 12).

While we can certainly consider biopolitics as a strategic form of “government of the living” of modernity, Marzocca advises us against the temptation to consider it the most paradigmatic

² Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France - 1975-1976*, ed. by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

one. He rather invites us to frame it in “economization” of politics taking hold in the Modern Age.

Based on this premise, it is impossible to argue that biopolitics is the paradigm not only of modern political history but of the entire Western history, as in some post-Foucauldian theories that the author examines in the second and third chapters.

In the second chapter – *The Ancients and the Power Over Life* – Marzocca compares Foucault’s research with that of Hannah Arendt, who in *The Human Condition* points out that the ancient separation between the *oikonomia* (the sphere of life management) and the *polis* (the space of citizenship) falls apart with the Modern Age, when economy starts to become a matter of political interest and action (pp. 87-89).

Such a view – the idea, in other words, that the fusion between life and politics is an exclusively modern phenomenon – has been questioned by Mika Ojakangas: the Finnish scholar tries in fact to update Foucault’s studies on biopolitics by uncovering its «Greek origins» – more specifically, Platonic and Aristotelian.

Marzocca examines in depth this thesis in order to check its plausibility; but based on an accurate analysis of the passages of Plato’s and Aristotle’s works, he reaches different conclusions from Ojakangas. He shows that, at a closer look, certain eugenic and thanatopolitical implications of Plato’s *Republic* are devoid of biopolitical connotations. The goal for Plato is never to strengthen society’s physical power through the constitution of a biologically superior race; rather, he advocates the creation of a moral aristocracy of rulers capable of ensuring the unity and harmony of the political community (pp. 91-102). In this sense, by recommending “the community of wives, children, and property” to rulers, more than building a big family, Plato intends to abolish family itself in favor of a sphere of relationships that allows the state’s rulers and defenders to work for the common good, thanks to their freedom from those private interests that condition domestic life.

A similar ethical preoccupation is what according to Marzocca explains why, in his *Politics*, Aristotle attaches value to the number of people who can actively exercise citizenship in the *polis*. Despite being based on the substantial exclusion not only of slaves but also of foreigners, manual workers, and merchants, Aristotle’s idea of citizenship is not founded upon the discrimination of particular social figures but rather of the private activities absorbing the existence of those figures – therefore preventing them from exercising civic virtue (pp. 124-132). A preoccupation with virtue also underlies the Greek philosopher’s idea of the role of the citizen as the head of the family, who in the administration of the *oikos* is called to experience the same moderation required by life in the *polis* (pp. 132-136).

In this way, in addition to providing an original interpretation of the Aristotelian (and Greek) thought, Marzocca also reveals his interest in the *ethos* of the ancients – which brings him to approach the final Foucault and his research on the *care of the self*.

The link between biopolitics and the Greek world argued by Giorgio Agamben seems also rather unfounded to Marzocca. Among the first to start the debate on biopolitics in the nineties, *Homo Sacer's* author – along with Toni Negri and Roberto Esposito – testifies to the vivacity of the Italian research on this topic. That is why in the third chapter Marzocca explores the thought of these three thinkers, calling attention to their most original aspects as well as the contradictions and the critical points of their nullification of some conceptual distinctions established by Foucault.

Among these is the distinction between biopower and sovereignty, which Agamben considers invalid in the light of Schmitt's conception of sovereign power as the power to decide on the state of exception, leaving citizens in the condition of killable lives. This thesis leads the Italian author to the idea not only that sovereignty is in its essence biopolitical, but also that biopolitics is constantly ready to turn into thanatopolitics – with the “camp” being the true paradigm of modernity.

Marzocca, on his part, observes that in this way Agamben dissolves the method of analytic distinction between different forms of power at the core of Foucault's genealogy (pp. 148-149). He also argues that, unless the origin of biopolitics is linked specifically to the medical power-knowledge apparatuses originated from modern governmentality, it is difficult to explain why proto-modern absolute power has not immediately become a full biopower, despite having an almost unconditional sovereignty (pp. 153-154).

Moving on to Negri, Marzocca examines the theory that, thanks to globalization, productive relations depend nowadays on the creative cooperation of the “multitude”, acquiring an immediate biopolitical connotation in a positive and emancipatory way. Negri proposes a distinction between biopower, as an external power on life and its productivity, and biopolitics, as a form of cooperative autonomy and political subjectivation of the multitude. While Negri maintains that Foucault failed to connect political subjectivation with productive activities, Marzocca remarks that Negri's productivism prevents from problematizing the effects of economic processes on the individual and collective *ethos* (pp. 165-176).

Marzocca then focuses on Esposito's attempt to outline an affirmative biopolitics, with the goal of escaping the thanatopolitical implications of a biopower founded upon a structural tendency to immunize the social body against entities perceived as alien (pp. 177-186). As is shown, this theory also tends to uncritically put life at the center of politics, reaffirming biopolitics as the only horizon of life in common.

Marzocca's idea, in short, is that all political theories based on the centrality of life need to be problematized, inasmuch as they do not fully question modern economic rationality to which biopolitics is closely related. Hence the need for a historical investigation of this relationship going even beyond Foucault's research; an investigation which Marzocca carries out in the following chapter, where he analyzes the most evident historical example of political assistance to the life and the health of the population: the *welfare state*. What is notable is that not only does he reconstruct the welfare state's historical roots, but he also reveals elements of continuity with the liberal (and neoliberal) economicism it apparently opposes.

In the fourth chapter, Marzocca starts his analysis from the study conducted by Malthus on the problem of population growth and the misery it causes. A problem which the economist and Anglican priest proposes to solve through an «economic moralization of people's lives» (p. 208) based on saving and chastity, with the implementation and the success of these precepts being left to individual responsibility.

Marzocca illustrates how these ideas not only would be at the foundation of 19th-century's philanthropic organizations but would also lead to forms of insurance against the risks concerning life, which would be taken up, in different versions, first by the liberal state, then by the welfare state, and finally by the neoliberal state, always on the basis of the centrality of the individual as a productive subject or economic actor.

Referring to the theses of Castel, Rosanvallon, and Donzelot, Marzocca argues that social security systems – which are linked to the idea of the state as an “insurer” of the life of the individual – become a prerogative of public power when 19th-century revolts make it clear that issues related to health, illnesses, accidents, working conditions, unemployment, old age, etc. can no longer be ignored. This is what brings about «the invention of the social» understood as a separate dimension from the political-judicial sphere the liberal state tends to favor.

In the Bismarckian state, where the foundations of the welfare state are laid in the context of a strategy of neutralization of the Social Democratic party, Marzocca outlines a connection between biopower, imperialism and militarism. A close tie between biopolitics and thanatopolitics also appears evident considering that the very project of the modern welfare state originated in the United Kingdom as a “promise” to the population aimed to mobilize it for the pursuit of military victory (pp. 214-238). In any case, it is primarily a link between the social state, biopower, and economic rationality that emerges from the modern relationship between the state, conceived as a protector/insurer, and the citizen, conceived as a taxpayer and user of services who is (or aspires to be) first and foremost a producer.

On this basis, it is possible for Marzocca to unveil the secret affinity between the social state and the neoliberal model that imposes itself through the critique of the welfare state, taking up and radicalizing the view of man as an economic individual – more specifically, as an entrepreneur of himself who takes care of his own “human capital” and that of his children (pp. 251-261). Such elements are key in the thought of neoliberal theorist Gary Becker (it is worth mentioning that Becker also updates Malthus' analysis by pointing out the tendency of parents to have fewer children nowadays and the consequent birth rate decline).

Convincingly, Marzocca shows the common thread underlying the different strategies of power implemented from the 18th century to the present, which are all based on a single ethical-political model remaining overall unchanged: that of the individual as a bio-economic subject closed within the horizon of modern economic rationality.

In the fifth chapter, the author analyses how the increasing expectations of health care, raised by the welfare state, started being redirected by neoliberalism in the seventies and eighties towards the logic of the market and private medicine, due to the more or less justified assumption that costs were becoming unsustainable for states (pp. 263-268).

Neoliberalism's growing hegemony gave rise to a biomedicalization of society centered on the pivotal role of family, conceived as the privileged sphere of the assumption of a «genetic responsibility» of the individual (p. 269).

In this regard, Marzocca examines the thought of Nikolas Rose. This author argues that contemporary molecular biology has played such a big role in the "decomposition" of organisms into tissues, cells, and DNA fragments, that it has become impossible for biopower to be founded on any kind of relationship between the individual and the social body (pp. 272-280). However, while in Rose's view this also makes eugenic and racist implications of biopolitics no longer possible in advanced liberal societies, Marzocca warns against such a conclusion. He remarks that neoliberalism frequently combines itself with authoritarian or nationalistic tendencies; it is not a coincidence, in this sense, that advanced liberal societies often build walls and close borders against immigration when the "demand" for these measures becomes greater on the "political market" (pp. 280-282).

The problem pointed out by Marzocca is, in the case of Rose, a refusal to criticize contemporary biopolitical tendencies and their core principles, whose acceptance prevents from conceiving alternative ethical-political models to that of neoliberalism. For instance, Rose claims that the genetic responsibility that brings the individual closer to his/her family might encourage innovative forms of «biosociality or biological citizenship». It is clear that such a conviction depends on the author's unwillingness to question neoliberal conceptions, centered on forms of individual responsabilization that end up promoting the private sphere and the care of the human bio-capital of the people who are part of it (pp. 283-296).

In contraposition to this substantial acceptance of contemporary biocapitalism, Marzocca moves on to examine the critical perspective of Melinda Cooper. This author writes about the processes of privatization, financialization, and commercialization of life started in Reagan's America thanks to increasing investments on genetic research and biotechnologies. She also highlights how these processes – especially as a consequence of the birth of regenerative medicine – cannot but lead to phenomena of "delirium" and capitalistic "megalomania" (pp. 296-306).

Another interesting thesis of Cooper examined by Marzocca is that regarding the governance of the AIDS epidemic as a global humanitarian emergency in the eighties, particularly in sub-Saharan African countries. It is worth noting that this form of governance was implemented in the same historical period in which neoliberal strategies started to deprive states from the functions of life protection. That is a clear example of how *emergency*, within the framework of neoliberal biopolitics, acquires a position of ever-growing centrality, also on account of the technological and environmental risks that neoliberalism itself contributes to create making them – as noted by Beck – global and incalculable (pp. 306-322).

It is through this kind of analysis that Marzocca approaches the environmental question, which is examined in detail in the sixth chapter. The environment, according to Foucault, represents the reference spatiality of biopolitics; nevertheless, Marzocca observes that it has never become an object of systematic political attention. Historically, the object of biopower's intervention has always been the life of the population, in relation to which the *milieu* remains

an external and separate element. This separateness has in fact never really been questioned – not even by ecological thought (pp. 325-330).

To explain why, Marzocca retraces the genesis and development of scientific ecology, with a special focus on botanical geography, biological evolutionism, the population ecology, and the ecosystem ecology (pp. 330-339). Especially in the latter, he detects certain economic connotations of the concept of biosphere, understood as an enormous mechanism of accumulation, consumption, and conversion of energy that needs to function in a balanced way in order for the production of “living mass” to continue to take place without risk. In a sense, ecology ends up representing a form of economic rationality, however “superior” to that of normal economy.

Marzocca essentially shows how the paradigm of economization presents itself even through ecological thinking. This, according to him, might be explained by focusing on the historical connection that arose between the biopolitical attention to the environment and the economic governmentality to which biopolitics has been subjected since its very origins.

What is certain is that –thanks particularly to liberalism and neoliberalism – the dominant economic rationality regularly hampers the attempts to push the environmental agenda in the government of society (p. 340). That is true not only in the sense that economic interests are consistently favored compared to environmental issues, but also in the sense that ecological-political strategies are themselves expressed in neoliberal economic-financial terms (as in the case of the commercialization of international credits related to the CO₂ quantities that are not released into the atmosphere).

While in this perspective the environment continues to be conceived as an external element to men’s lives, a vision that in Marzocca’s opinion escapes this dichotomy between life and environment is that of Gregory Bateson. With his idea of an *Ecology of Mind*, the British thinker proposes to see the environment and the living beings as parts of a single unit of survival constituting a “mind”, in which no separation can be found between a mental system and its ecosystem (pp. 364-375).

Marzocca, however, claims that Bateson’s thought lacks a true ethical-political connotation, such as that which can be found in the late Foucault. In this way, he goes back to the philosopher from whom his book started, formulating perhaps his most original reflections with respect to man’s position in the world.

Marzocca notes that, in his studies on the *care of the self* during Greek and Roman antiquity, Foucault presents Cynicism and Stoicism as forms of an *etho-poiesis* based on the «cosmicisation of oneself»: that is, the construction of a *bios* qualifying itself through the recognition of the relationship with the multiplicity of natural and artificial events with which man is intertwined. Marzocca argues that this *etho-poiesis* can also be seen as an *eco-poiesis* (p. 379), at the foundation of which is man’s connection with the world as a «dwelling-place»: a connection present in the term *ethos* itself, which – as shown by Heidegger – originally meant «abode» (p. 380).

What Marzocca wants to suggest here, ultimately, is that the ecological crisis is first and foremost a crisis of modern man’s *ethos*: the result of a long process of a «*de-cosmization*»

characterizing modern history (p. 389). An idea completely in line with Hannah Arendt's thinking, which is often echoed in this work just as much as Foucault's.

While this kind of analysis might seem unrelated to the theme of biopolitics, a clear link appears in the last chapter, dedicated to the event that marked the year in which this book was published: the pandemic.

The chapter starts by presenting modern man's de-cosmization and alienation from the natural world as the cause of SARS-COV2's outbreak. The idea that we can deny our bond with the ecosystem – of which biomedicine's focus on the genetic microcosm is a symptom and a causing factor at the same time – is indeed among the sources of natural disasters such as zoonoses and the global spread of viruses (pp. 395-396).

Attempting a comparison with one of the greatest pandemics of the past, the *Black Death*, Marzocca emphasizes how natural factors related to climate changes both in Asia and in Europe intertwined with socio-political factors such as Mongol horsemen's nomadism and the traffic between the East and the West, thus causing the arrival of the pathogen from China to Europe (pp. 397-399). He then suggests that, with obvious differences, a similar series of events can be seen at the origin of the maturation and global spread of SARS-COV2.

There are four socio-political factors that Marzocca enumerates as contributing factors to epidemic diseases of zoonotic origin in our time: deforestation, industrial stock farms, urbanization, and the increasing mobility of people, other living beings, and goods. These are phenomena that, especially in times of constant "global mobility" such as these, cannot but increase the contribution of anthropogenic factors to spillovers and the spread of viruses (pp. 399-402).

It is precisely the global dimension of these phenomena and their epidemic implications that has led planetary organizations such as the WHO to tackle the problem of "emerging infectious diseases" (AIDS, SARS, the "swine flu", MERS, Ebola, etc.). Marzocca proceeds to examine the strategies of "global surveillance" adopted in recent years by international institutions, based on the assumption of the unpreparedness of nation states to address these global threats. He also highlights the critical issues of these strategies, which rely on the collection of information both through the traditional statistical approach and the new algorithmic technologies processing big data. Despite having proved sometimes successful, these technologies have often shown to be unreliable; the collection of statistical data, on the other hand, depends for the most part on the uncertain willingness and capability of the states to communicate data in a thorough and transparent way (pp. 403-418).

It is essentially due to these critical issues – as observed by Marzocca – that "global surveillance" failed in the containment of SARS-COV2. This forced nation states to go back to the disciplinary model of the quarantined city: «in this way they took a step back in the history of biopolitics at least until the 17th century». It should in fact be noted that this model predates that of vaccination established by the medicalization of society and the biopolitical normalization of biological, demographic, and epidemic processes (pp. 418-424).

Some interesting considerations follow regarding the anticipation of the vaccination campaigns during 2020. On the one hand, because of that anticipation, we might have reinforced our compliance with the immunization paradigm that, according to Esposito, represents the defining character of modern biopolitics. On the other hand, the awareness that our individual life is closely tied to the life of the population might have revived forms of solidarity capable of mitigating the biopolitical tendency to immunize the collective body against social and communitarian relationships. Furthermore, one cannot but note the renewed centrality that states and public power seem to have acquired with the pandemic, which might have had the effect of weakening neoliberal privatization policies (pp. 429-432).

Notwithstanding, Marzocca maintains his methodological caution and warns against easy optimism: a greater weight of the state does not necessarily mean a rebirth of a political realm that has long vanished. For him, a solution to the decline of politics would rather involve going beyond the state-market dualism, embracing an ethical-political perspective that problematizes the relationship between the individual and the population (or between the individual and life) established by governmentality over the last centuries. It involves formulating forms of our *ethos* capable of opening new horizons of community beyond the mere commonality of biological life.

The pandemic may perhaps help us in this regard, by making us rediscover a wider dimension than the sphere of family and the population: a «worldly sphere» which we are called to live in common, be it defined «as ecosystem, environment, territory, place, city, world, cosmos» (pp. 433-434). As much as we try to neglect it, locking ourselves in our individual, private microcosm, sooner or later it comes to remind us that our existence cannot prescind from it. The pandemic is simply the latest (though not the last) demonstration of this truth which for too long we have refused to see.

The pandemic urges us with utter clarity to this kind of reflections. It ultimately prompts us to be aware both of our relationship with the environment and of our position in the world and in the cosmos. This, indeed, is the most precious meaning of Marzocca's book, which goes far beyond the initial proposal to provide a summary of the studies on biopolitics.

ooooooo

Paolo Castoro graduated from the University of Bari "Aldo Moro" with a degree in Social Ethics. He focuses on themes related to the ethical-political evolutions of the modern and contemporary world. Among his interests are the relationship between economy and politics, the spatial transformations of life in common, and the effects of power relations on contemporary ethos and active citizenship, within the framework of neoliberal governmentality, post-democracy, and the emergence of "post-liberal" movements.