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The Political Immunity of Discourse

By Erik Empson

The English translation of Roberto Esposito's *Bios* appears to be an important contribution to the critical analysis of a politics of life, but can the book's claim to 'revitalise' politics really be thought from within the exclusive bounds of academic philosophy? Erik Empson reviews

I dare say it is not me alone who, when discussing the nature of biopolitics with the uninitiated, has found himself rather meekly repeating formulas such as 'politics become the management of life itself' or 'control over the body has come to be the object of power', whilst feeling that they fall short of capturing the specificity of what more subtle commentators have discussed at length – the change from disciplinary societies to those based on control – as a genealogy of modern industrial societies. If modern social and political life can be rightly called biopolitical, we need to find an apposite definition of what this means on its own terms, without having to first explain the history of what came before and what is so different about today.

[IMAGE]

Image: Theo Michael, *Bad Immunisation*, 2009

A sympathetic view of Roberto Esposito's book, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* would be that he aims to do just this: produce an affirmative form of biopolitics based on a nuanced philosophical understanding of both sides of the equation – life and politics. Arguably philosophy is more readily suited to this task than any other discipline, or perhaps we've exhausted other approaches to the degree that this is the only one we have left. But one wonders if it can address the particular conundrum of biopolitics that Esposito sets out to solve, namely 'why does a politics of life always risk being reversed into a work of death?'

Whilst much recent critical scholarship has tried to detail the untold history of this transition, Esposito's question presupposes it. It takes for granted that there is something universal within the biopolitical that can be drawn out and used to qualify and moderate ethical action and put it to service for the political health of a community. Esposito's initial survey is broad; it features discussions about a child's right to sue for not being aborted in France in 2000 and the 'humanitarian' war in Afghanistan in 2001, the police massacre of Chechen hostages in Russia in 2002, rape in Rwanda in 2004 and China's single child policy. These are the type of parables that dominate bioethics, innervating and encouraging the participation of an otherwise apathetic televised public in the spectacular interplay of complicated policy decisions: the deceitful managerial languages that disguise expediency behind masks of human concerns.

The idea that government directly entails a politics of, or over life, is fast in danger of becoming a platitude (of more interest is that political science, business studies and cultural criticism have internalised this discourse reflexively by understanding their project in such terms). Like Esposito, we begin to ask the question: 'wasn't it always?' The fact of biopolitics doesn't seem to help us to get to the truth of biopolitics. Maybe biopower is only ever local, historically circumscribed, situational, bound to the technologies available, a particular method employed to differentiate who can and who cannot live. Given the existing genealogies of power here, and remembering for a moment all those that didn't make it onto Fox News, what can philosophy add to an understanding of the process on a generic level (if such a level does in fact exist)? The guarded back-cover endorsement of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri notwithstanding, this is not another book that will take up biopolitics through the increasingly familiar lenses of changes in subjectivity and class composition. In fact Esposito's object is both narrower and wider. He wants to revise political theory and make that revision central to a new analysis of modernity: 'contemporary thought cannot fool itself in belatedly defending modern political categories that have been shaken and overturned.' Promising enough, unless it's just another thinking away of difficult political realities like class or inequality.

The particular category Esposito has in mind is sovereignty. But in claiming that biopolitics is the antithesis to sovereignty (or at times the substitution of it) and thus the linchpin of the modern age, Esposito is only reiterating what others have said before. If, as his language suggests, he is speaking to the converted, the question is of the 'do bears shit in the woods?' variety. However, in claiming as he does that *immunisation* is the true motor of the transition to a biopolitical paradigm, he is saying something distinctive and new. Although whether it is useful, real or true is another matter entirely.

By highlighting and elevating one particular 'logic' out of the fairly abundant selection available to us to explain modernity, and especially because it concerns a pretty bloody serious issue 'the emergence of strategies for the treatment of 'life unworthy of life' (the Nazi phrase Esposito uses consciously and deliberately) ' it seems inexcusable that the author fails to mark early on the particular sense of immunity he is employing. Immunity can mean exemption from liability in a legal sense, or the biological process where the presence of antibodies prevents a disease. While we may have optimistically hoped that the author would bring these two meanings together in a productive combination, right from the start he plays with their semantic ambivalences.

Semantic Orbits

The clean white, transparent, mechanical Machiavellian magic of the sovereign state paradigm has mutated. In the murky depths of modern biotechnological societies of control, the obscure dark arts of legalistic mumbo-jumbo, the speaking in tongues, the high and low brow geomancy now reigns supreme. What makes immunity a more useful instrument in understanding this transition than any other astrological linking of points to make constellations that become signs?

The author charts three major moments in the theorisation of biopolitics: German vitalist thought about politics, race and nation at the beginning of the 20th century, French thought in the 1960s, and the late 1970s in the Anglo-Saxon world when research institutes concerned with biology and politics, still in existence today, were established. In doing so Esposito rightly shows some of the deeper

connections between the experience of fascism, the science of the state and neoliberalism's resurrection of natural limits to social and political engineering. To our relief his earlier jarring reference to Nazi eugenics finds its place. These intellectual currents give over to biology what many readers of this book, should they choose to read its passages rather than the Foucault lectures of 1976 that it paraphrases, would no doubt want to claim for politics: the power to change our circumstances, our capabilities and to decide, outside the grip of nature, our own moral code.

This brief genealogy is fine as it goes, although there is a tendency here to only trace the appearance of the term in explicit connections between biology and politics. In fact immunisation is part and parcel of the biological roots of normal, healthy social science and the biopolitical is much more than that which explicitly goes under its name. That such a large part of the origins of modern social scientific currents, progressive and reactionary alike, modelled themselves on the biological sciences means that a more systematic, comprehensive study is needed to complement the sketchy history that Esposito offers. For sure, the reason he does not do this is because his object is not the general history of the reduction of social life to being the poor relative of biology, but to show that the attempt to engineer society along these lines is intrinsic to the nature of modernity. Nazism was not a unique and abortive experiment with organising life on the basis of biological determinants. Immunisation is more than an organic metaphor, it is an expression of an increasingly general tendency to think and act politics according to biological principles.

Esposito is interested in exploring the moral codes that govern action as a dialectic between normativisation as the self preservation of a community forming a *bios*, and individuation as a mode of a community's immunisation of itself or equally, the defence against the very norms that bind communities. This is the central point of his book but it is precisely here, on the book's apparent strengths, that its failure to clearly demarcate its terms of biological defence or legal impunity makes itself apparent. On the one hand, to be immune is to have non-being, i.e. nothing in common with the community. On the other hand immunity is the negative introjection of the negative modality of its opposite as an internal defensive apparatus of the community. Esposito likes these semantic ambivalences, this surplus of sense, because in the multiple derivations of sense he can have his proverbial cake and eat it; the whole can constitute itself through its parts, whilst any unpalatable slices can be left on the table.

I do not intend to argue that modernity might be interpretable only through an immunitary paradigm [...] nor deny the heuristic productivity of more consolidated exegetical models of use such as rationalization, secularization or legitimation. But it seems to me that all three can gain from a contamination with an explicative category, which is at the same time more complex and more profound. One that constitutes its underlying premises.

The paragraph continues:

The immunisation paradigm instead refers us to a semantic horizon that itself contains plural meanings — for instance, precisely that of *munus*. Investing a series of lexical areas of different provenance and destination, the dispositif of its neutralisation will prove to be furnished by equal internal articulations as is testified even today by the polyvalence that the term of immunity still maintains. But this horizontal richness doesn't exhaust the hermeneutic potential of the category. (p.51)

Whereas the point of the book is to make a claim for the centrality of immunisation, its conceptual elaboration seeks to marginalise it. Esposito appears to be giving with one hand and taking away with the other. We were promised the overturning of categories but the play with multiple meanings and the obscurity of the text is beginning to suggest this book is an inconsequential verbal stunt in a semantic universe without gravity. That he should go on, as we will, to discuss the horror of the Nazi experience and its exemplary status in the biopolitical nexus, might take the fun out of the acrobatics, but there is hope

[IMAGE]

Image: Theo Michael, *The Trouble with Biopolitics*, 2009

The Death Machine

Other theorists have placed Nazism as intrinsic to modernity. One thinks of the Bauman's description of the Holocaust as the outcome of the process of technological rationalisation. What makes Esposito's contribution distinct is that by identifying three elements of Hitlerism — the absolute normativisation of life, the double enclosure of the body and the suppression of birth, in fact the least explicit political elements of it — he aims to find an exemplary instance of how important the immunisation of a community is to its apparent survival, as well as the inherent dangers of the process. Thereby he aims to isolate both the shortcomings of Foucault's analysis of the biopolitical and identify the approximate and provisional contours of an affirmative biopolitics that is capable of overturning the Nazi politics of death in a politics that is no longer over life but of life.

If Esposito's challenge is to find a positive biopolitics of life, it is made all the more heavy given that he is determined to discover it in the dark recesses of a history that by and large the rest of humanity wants to forget. Either Esposito is one of the brave souls who, with all the risks it entails, wants to immerse himself in the historical problem of Nazism, not so much that it might not be forgotten, merely bearing witness to atrocity, but lest we fail to learn a specific lesson from it. Or he is carelessly and clumsily building a half-baked theory on the back of an event with enough gravity of its own to carry it off. One of the major questions Esposito poses for an affirmative biopolitics is, if the resistance of life is stronger than power, how do we account for the outcome obtained in modernity of the mass production of death? Clearly his affirmation of life is not going to be totally *bonvivant*, so why do this?

According to Esposito, it is not in spite of Nazism that I have grown up (as part of the generation born in the mid-1970s) with a particular sense of right over my body, as having inherited a certain political leverage in defence of life, or living in a society where it is more or less taken for granted that life be defended. It was precisely those values that underpinned Nazi policies of eugenics and mass extermination. Indeed for the author, Nazism is the threshold of the contemporary age. Esposito makes this clear. Carl Schmitt is wrong; the specificity of the fascist state is not the making normal of the exception to the law in politics, but accepting the normalisation of biology as the object of politics: the management of the health of the nation. The showerheads that emitted noxious gases were hygenising and sanitising against the disease that had infected the purity of the German people. Authorisation for each act of ethnic cleansing came from the medical establishment, not mere pen-pushers but individuals fulfilling their Hippocratic Oath to cure their patient (the German people).

Nazism as a form of death, the indifference over life or the making of life into a machine of death is an all too easy point of reference if you are looking to find an affirmation of the human by contrasting it to its other. But it works polemically not only because it produces righteous indignation, but because the reader is existentially driven to want to find life or, one might say, hope there. Paradoxically Esposito denies us this.

As a political point of orientation the Holocaust is rightly exhausted and as a theoretical foundation, it is only the banal other of an entity, life, which (as Esposito otherwise rightly notes) is maximally differentiated within itself and thus a very different object to that established when contrasted with its other. Nazism is not the other of humanity. Its practice of death is not the other of life, but the extension of a practice of creating *bios* â a biopolitical community â in an appalling, deluded, disastrous way. For its practitioners was this wickedness not a dimension of life, a perverse joy or one of the perversions of joy?

So, immersed in the challenge of outdoing Foucault at home, Esposito arguably uncritically adopts his tendency, often latent in its semantic drifts, to speak of power in all too self-identical terms, as a subject that exists in its own right and can take decisions (p.38). And this is probably due to the fact that Esposito is concerned with the discourses that justify the state rather than the fact of the state. Indeed the clinical character of Nazi propaganda can always be contrasted with the grim, intoxicated reality of the execution of its principles of cleansing.

The analysis of âscientificâ discourse is only one side of the true picture of political life and all too often can fail to register alternative currents either suppressed by the mainstream or conveniently left out if they donât fit into the schema. And though it may be true of the Nazi State that it distributed the sovereign right to kill, it tells us nothing of the remorse felt by those that did, or the protests of those that didnât. This clearly isnât the point, but perhaps it should have been. For Foucault, power is a set of practices, institutions and languages, and resistance is also power, not opposed to it. In *Bios* we donât hear about how the immunisation paradigm is resisted. Only those practices which are within its dialectical orbit are recorded, not the refusals, the suicides and the other lines of flight that escape it. Thus strangely, although that is not his intention, we are left with a political theory that documents only *potestas*, not *potentia*, i.e. only power from above, formal constitutionally sanctioned power. Or perhaps the community-immunity nexus is so embracing that it encompasses all forms of activity. At

any rate the deficit is all the more striking given that the author aims to vitalise politics. We wonder which politics? Let's hope it's the good guys.

Immunising Discourse

Where Esposito revisits the canon of political theory, the acuteness of the immunisation paradigm begins to slip by the wayside. What was meant to be a genealogy becomes a clunky narrative wherein the subtlety of the historical is lost in the rhetorical. Passing through Plato, Hobbes, with a nod at Hegel, Locke (concerning man's possession of his body), Bentham and so on, the immunisation concept appears at times decidedly forced, grafted onto the subject matter. Of course, he finds the most salient expressions of it in Heidegger (whose philosophy the author is at pains to describe as the antithesis of Nazi thinking about biopolitics) and Nietzsche, who begins the special thinking about *bios*; the weak as a limitation on the strong that Esposito seeks to highlight. Make no mistake, if desperately convoluted to the point of being overbearing, if turgid to bursting point, this is still a very rich, inventive analysis. But its inventiveness borders on fiction, so we should ask what his book communicates and to whom.

[IMAGE]

Image: Theo Michael, *Single Child Policy*, 2009

Esposito's generation has a particular psychological relationship to the fascist experience; often ancillary to that is an obsession with community as the locus of social life. What are these communities that are the uncritically accepted subject of political reference? To his credit, like few others, Esposito understands that communities form on the basis of exclusion but he wants to find a way of saving the possibility of community from this fact of community. The tentative conclusion is that communities gain their strength by allowing for the proliferation of different forms of life. Ultimately the Nazi State's immunitary logic was turned against itself: protected, inoculated, the population became weak and subject to an inner and irreversible degeneration, its policy of purification for life resulting in a thanatopolitics, a regime of death. Presumably if we enact the opposite, open our communities up to the other, go beyond normativity by defending the immanence of singularity, we have an affirmative biopolitics.

Esposito expresses the political horizons of a particular generation when he claims that we can arise above Nazism only by knowing its drifts and precipices. Well, will it ever be acceptable for me to say 'Treblinka' in the same sentence as 'playstation' without it being the most obscene of verbal acts? That the two are genetically connected, i.e. the latter games console being my generation's prize for not being communally integrated into society-wide clinical racial pogroms, is also an obscenity. The post-war narrowing of the *polis*, the opening up of the social, are part and parcel of the banalisation of life and the muting of politics. And if the Holocaust discourse has had a role in this it has been to modulate political extremism. The problem with Esposito is that he can understand this process in the third person but not the part he has to play in it.

The problem is not so much that biopolitics adopts a paradigm of immunisation, of creating the healthy community by delimiting its interaction and integration with others, but that biopower as a socially constitutive process of the state, adopts that project by a more thorough immersion within the paradigm: limited immigration is healthy because it adds to diversity of life practices; the multi-cultural hypostatisation of difference is the antidote to commonalities constituted on ethnic lines; moderation and the legal regulation of ethnic identity safeguards against extreme pathologies, and so on.

The difference between Esposito on the one hand and Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Negri on the other — irrespective of the former's negative definition of biopolitics and the latter's positive one — is that both Agamben and Negri are part of a broader movement for political change that is already self-reflexively embedded within the biopolitical and the questioning of the state. Esposito, on the contrary, seeks to import vitality into politics from the outside, and given that he appears to know no politics other than the prevailing or official discourse that sanctions the formation of community, it is hard to see his subject of change as anything other than the enlightened liberal public individual or the state, both suppositions of exactly that paradigm of the large-scale social engineering of *bios* that conflicts with the fact of life that each singularity is striving to exercise. It is difficult to rise to a defence of the political (against it being flattened into biology) that does not formalise exactly those exclusionary *dispositifs* that Esposito abjures.

The most obvious question to ask when confronted with a new discourse is: who is its subject, who is its object? Why does Esposito want to vitalise politics and what would that mean? Does he want to immunise society against fascism? Could it be that his intentions are not altogether as sincere as we have made out? To turn the tables somewhat, it could be argued that the most salient example of the paradigm of immunisation in relation to modernity is within discourse itself. Having dug about amongst the swollen, stinking corpses of various biocratic intellectual contributions to statecraft, Esposito knows better than most the complicity between developing ways of thinking and developing ways of acting. So it is striking that there is such an exclusionary tone to his discourse. And although my argument runs a risk of being seen as anti-intellectualism, I shall pursue it.

For all of its messing about in the sandpit of polyvalence, Esposito's discourse is not a coherently pluralist one, but peculiarly an objectivist one that inoculates and defends its personal identity through the deconstruction of its own positioning. "To avoid death, life must be reborn in differentiated, individuated ways." Quite so. And to avoid academic death, theory must be reborn in differentiated, individuated ways. Any other metaphor of immunisation and inoculation selectively taken from man's inglorious and homicidal past of purity and extermination can also be readily applied to high brow academic philosophy. And to stretch our criticism as far as it goes, in order to inoculate a treatise, it needs to find general defenses against particular attacks, and it does that by injecting itself with particular antibodies that have something of a common currency. With Esposito's work, the reader's expectations of what a nuanced treatment of life over death might look like in positive terms are so unrewarded we are actually thankful that he chooses the safe but pusillanimous option of finding the solution in Spinoza. Safe because that latter has been appointed by postautonomia as the true father of antimodernity; pusillanimous because this could have been an intellectual point of departure rather than arrival.

This is not a book for the masses, the like of which we desperately need, but one targeted at an epistemic community that excludes them. It often slips into a language that appears to suggest that it is by correcting discourse that we somehow resolve the problems of the world. Indeed his translator arguably makes the same error when he claims that the current political crisis is the result of a collective failure to interrogate the immunitary logic associated with modern political thought. Crikey! The success of humankind's defence of life will depend on who reads and understands Esposito's book? Well surely if it had such a role, it should have been written in a form that had a real bearing on its content. For a book that claims to vitalise politics, no matter how suspect that sounds, to be convincing its style must be equal to its theoretical task and with this subject it would entail a poetry, not clinical shorthand. Books need souls. It need not have more popular appeal, but it needs the prose of thought to be more than a series of disjointed reinterpretations of existing fact and fancy.

[IMAGE]

Image: Theo Michael, *Bioextremist on the Rampage*, 2009

Actually for all of its post-structuralist rhetorical flourishes, *Bios* reads like Hegelian ruse, an attempt to conjure out of the black hat of the negative the white rabbit of modern sensibility. Yet it lacks the inner coherence of the dialectic. For the most part it is dimly aware of its own point of arrival or worse, frightened by what it finds there and in the breaking of this circle, the loss of the spontaneous simultaneity of the phenomenological and transcendental (the poetry of the text), it founders in its own uncertainties. And the dialectical inversions turn into pointless paradoxes, mediocre and defensive. It poses a micro-meta-narrative but allows itself to remain in pieces and fails to labour to unify speculatively what it does rhetorically.

So how did a philosophical book about life turn out to be so lifeless? One factor is the obsolescence of philosophy itself unless it can somehow practically meld critique with insurgency. Rather than do this, *Bios* is just one in a line of roundabout affirmations of the same conclusion about the discipline: its irrelevance. Esposito's problem is a self-negating one: it is impossible to affirm life in the abstract but only ever as many forms of actual life. Subject and object are annihilated in one fell swoop and because the political is thus rendered so infirm it is paradoxically only by a return to natural right that its role can apparently be resurrected.

Philosophy can only deal with the question of life if society guarantees life in general and the position of the philosopher. The distance needed for life to become an object of philosophy is one that refuses the possibility of the question of life being a practical one, its criticality is affirmed not by the word but by the social conditions in which the word is expressed. If life is directly contested, through civil war or ethnic cleansing, or through western intervention or through lack of western intervention, you do not need philosophy but religion, not deconstruction but ideology. In the absence of practical philosophical alternatives, these are the solutions people are turning to *en masse*. This kind of academic philosophy is a peculiar kind of indulgence, and one, to allude to Marx's infamous remark, probably best done in private.

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Info

Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, 2008