

NIALL GILDEA

Lancaster University

PARENTHESIS

The first chapter of Arthur Bradley's *Unbearable Life* is about the book's organizing concept, "unbearable life," and its attendant mode of study or observation: "nihilopolitical" inquiry. Bradley defines "unbearable life" as "the sovereign power to render life unborn, unlivèd or nonexistent,"¹ in contradistinction to the capacity to make die which he sees as the enduring preoccupation of biopolitical theory; so we can take that as a shorthand for the distinction between nihilopolitics and biopolitics. "Unbearable life" is that which is neither living nor dead, and that which is recognized as never having lived nor died. Dropping out of the traditional biopolitical terminuses (*Bios* and *Thanatos*) in this manner, unbearable life therefore offers a *nihilopolitical* critique of Foucauldian biopolitics.² For this reason, Bradley also terms unbearable life a "counter-genealogy,"³ opening onto a counter-genealogical hermeneutic whose starting-point is its inassimilability to the Foucauldian model of biopolitics (I will say more about this point shortly). The overarching hypothesis Bradley wants to explore in the book, then, is that sovereignty be understood as the power to make life neither live nor die. However, as he proceeds to demonstrate throughout, it is only logical that life forms reproduced in this way should react in ways which surprise the "natural" matrix of life and death from which attempts are made to exclude them.

When I reviewed *Unbearable Life for Textual Practice*, I wrote that the book involves itself in the Foucauldian tradition of biopolitical inquiry in a manner that is iconoclastic and almost melancholic.⁴ In Chapter 5, discussing the "fabulous retroactivity" (in Derrida's phrase) of the French Revolution's Rousseauian constitution of a *volonté générale*, Bradley asks: "Who or what must the French Revolution retroactively declare to be unbearable life—never there—in order to produce the fable of a people who are already there?"⁵ Bradley marbles this question through the book, vis-à-vis a "virtuous", "vitalist", "affirmative"⁶

¹ Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 3.

² Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 33-4.

³ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 25.

⁴ Niall Gildea, 'Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* [review]', *Textual Practice* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1838103>.

⁵ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 122.

⁶ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 28, 32, 39.

Foucauldian biopolitics which retains, as an article of faith basically, the conviction that there is, somewhere and somehow, a spark of life which always will evade sovereign capture and precede categorical production.⁷ What I want to pick out from Chapter 1 today is how this seam of Foucauldian biopolitics, for Bradley, is also involved in the fabular production of people, or life forms, which are “already there”.

Where the Foucauldian metanarrative is concerned, it is the very concept of “unbearable life” which, Bradley shows, is conjured by Foucault in a Collège de France lecture of 1976,⁸ but just as swiftly magicked away in favour of the more readily available pairing of the bio- and thanato-political. In the lecture, which we now know as *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault refers to *patria potestas*, the absolute authority of a Roman father or father-figure over his household, and specifically over whether his children were alive or dead. In this form of classical sovereignty, those subjects are neither alive nor dead until the moment of sovereign decision; a model crucially different from sovereignty understood in terms of various ways of allowing to live and making die, “metastasized,” as Bradley puts it, into biopower as techniques of making live and letting die. As Bradley notes, this official epistemological history, based on various antithetical construals of life and death, stands in an uncertain, and unexamined, relationship to the neither alive nor dead “neutrality” suggested, just once, by Foucault in his brief consideration of that specific Roman model.

This performativity, whereby the a-genealogy of unbearable life is brought into “being” through precisely the kind of sovereign gesture it will take as its object of analysis, means that Foucault takes his place in the book, alongside Augustine, Macbeth, Hobbes, Robespierre, and Schmitt, as a political agent involved in the production of unbearable life—and, like many of those case studies, produces these forms of life despite himself, as it were. Bradley says as much in a parenthesis—surely the most apposite phrasal form where unbearable life is concerned – on page 25:

To take Foucault’s hypothesis about sovereignty over life and death seriously, we must thus begin to imagine a counter-genealogy – *a kind of unbearable life* – of his familiar genealogy of “life” as the historical passage from sovereign power to biopower, sovereignty to governmentality, making die to making live, and so on – in short, of the entire history of what has come to be known as “biopolitics.” (My emphasis.)

⁷ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 39-40.

⁸ Bradley, *Unbearable Life*, 21-6.

I mean this as the strongest compliment when I say that this strikes me as an approach undertaken in the spirit of Jacques Derrida's work. Indeed, I would like to suggest that Foucault's naming under erasure of unbearable life, at the very historico-institutional moment that he inaugurates the area of study and mode of inquiry termed the "biopolitical," constitutes a foundational double-gesture of a piece with the operations biopolitical inquiry will go on to name, diagnose, raise consciousness about, and so forth.

I would suggest, with Derrida, that Foucault has form for this. There isn't space to do anything but refer briefly to Derrida's reading of Foucault and Descartes in "Cogito and the History of Madness." Derrida, in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it way, collocates the procedures of Foucault and Descartes via the term "pré-compréhension," which appears only twice in the text but does so decisively. Firstly (but I'm using "firstly" advisedly, as I'll soon explain), he uses it to describe the unexamined idea of "madness" which Foucault must nonetheless hold in order to associate it with the Greek idea of *hybris* ("recklessness") and thereby gesture to a conceptual framework which did not imprison madness in a negative relation to sanity:

Foucault, in rejecting the psychiatric or philosophical material that has always imprisoned the mad, winds up employing – inevitably – a popular and equivocal notion of madness, taken from an unverifiable source. This would not be serious if Foucault used the word only in quotation marks, as if it were the language of others, of those who, during the period under study, used it as a historical instrument. But everything transpires as if, in a continuous and underlying way, an assured and rigorous precomprehension of the concept of madness, or at least of its nominal definition, were possible and acquired.⁹

Later in Derrida's paper, where he discusses the "mad audacity" of the Cartesian Cogito, which presupposed a validity of thinking prior to, and unaffected by the possibility of, madness or unreason, he writes:

even if the totality of what I think is imbued with falsehood or madness, even if the totality of the world does not exist, even if nonmeaning has invaded the totality of the world, including the very contents of my thought, I still think, I am as I think. Even if I do not in fact grasp the totality, if I neither understand nor embrace

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie," Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967)/Derrida, 'Cogito and the History of Madness', Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Oxford: Routledge, 2001; repr. 2006), 66/49.

it, I still formulate the project of doing so, and this project is meaningful in such a way that it can be defined only in relation to a precomprehension of the infinite and undetermined totality. This is why, in this excess of the possible, the rightful and the meaningful over and against the real, the factual and the existent, [Descartes'] project is mad, and recognizes madness as its liberty and its own possibility.¹⁰

It is worth noting in passing that the reference to Foucauldian precomprehension was added by Derrida as part of a long parenthesis which comprises the published text's only major difference from the version Derrida gave as a lecture at the Collège Philosophique in 1963.¹¹ That is, it was supplemented afterwards to focalize a shared basis in tendentious virtuality which Derrida perceived as necessary to both of those epistemological projects getting off the ground.

Bradley's treatment of Foucault is not quite the same as this, despite sharing some of its methodology. Instead, Bradley returns to the moment of Foucault's hasty conceptual jettisoning of "unbearable life," telling a story of the epistemological life it might have lived — some of the major events of which life we'll read about in the other texts from this roundtable. It wouldn't be quite right to say that this is a way of "tarrying with the negative," in the phrase of Hegel's popularized by Slavoj Žižek, because "unbearable life," if I've understood it right, taps into that terrifying greyness, to paraphrase Jean Rhys, from which positives and negatives, theses and antitheses, lives, and deaths, and other such precomprehensions, offer a sort of refuge.

¹⁰ Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie" / Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness", 87/68, translation modified.

¹¹ Derrida, "Cogito et histoire de la folie" / Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness", 51n1/389n1.