THE AMBIVALENCES OF BIOPOLITICS

LAURA BAZZICALUPO

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Biopolitics is the government of life. It is politics as the governing, administering, and taking charge of humans as living beings as biological or bare life.[1] But why use the term *biopolitics*? The fact is that today we are witness to a series of phenomena in which "life" erupts on the scene with presumed and self-proclaimed immediacy. Dramatic and radicalizing events such as terrorism level all political mediations and pose alternatives as either vital or deadly (which amounts to the same thing), reducing politics to mere policing. So too is the global war on terrorism, which legitimizes itself in terms of the survival of one part of the globe, as it simultaneously threatens or "preemptively" grants [*eroga*] death to another part of the global population.

Biopolitics also refers to the enormous increase of migratory flows, whose protagonists are people without any personal identity other than that of belonging to a species. These are people whose hands are identified by either a print or a biological trace. How to manage people as if they were populations, that is, how to assimilate them or to reject them given the scarcity of resources; how to make permeable the system or to develop a precautionary reactivity in relation to these lives—these are the questions we face today. And of course we already know the obsessive reply, since it is one framed in terms of the security of our cities. The immune feature of modernity, as Roberto Esposito calls it, captures well the biopolitical characteristics of reacting to an aggression that is perceived as lethal [3].

Yet in the same semantic area we can see both the therapeutic and threatening features of biotechnology, techniques that relate not to someone's life but to *bios*. Disturbingly they link an increasingly self-referential technology to the symbolic horizon of life. The resulting chiasmus changes how we will want to think both life and technology. Consider how genetic research programs the traits of living beings, freeing them from natural deficiencies. Neurology and psychopharmacology manipulate behavior and emotions, the prelude to classifying individuals as high risk. In addition, biotechnology also challenges our sense of who finally is responsible for committing a crime, while at the same time reconfiguring the hiring plans of companies or changing the criteria of who is insurable. We can sense these changes less dramatically but more obsessively in how we eat and how we live: we always feel that something is missing.

Why use the term *biopolitics* to refer to such diverse phenomena? In the first instance, every day we see politics exerting power over life directly without mediation. In the second instance, biopolitics also signals the moment when the meanings that we have traditionally attributed to the term *politics* are now profoundly modified, thanks to the subjection of life *tout court* to politics. Politics slides incessantly toward an immanent

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1. [As uomo *in Italian refers to both men and women together as human beings, I have translated it throughout as either "human beings" or "people," depending upon the context. —Trans.]*

process—the time of life is above all a process—which intensifies, produces, and normalizes biologically. Admittedly, this aspect of politics remains unclear. We do not know exactly what kind of direct hold politics has over life, however. Certainly, it doesn't mean that everything in the end is political. We do not know what spaces are left, if any, to position ourselves outside or against this form of politics; or whether, to escape its grasp, we can resist by reinstating the traditional separations between the public and private spheres. It's simply not clear.

With the hope of understanding better, let us note that much like all political concepts, biopolitics undoubtedly is a polemical concept that only becomes comprehensible when seen in action. It is also one to watch with suspicion. Still, could the concept function heuristically by bringing to light, even without clarifying, some of the transformations that have occurred in our political experience? To my mind biopolitics effects two significant changes related to how we conceive politics, two essential though admittedly ambiguous features that provoke a reciprocal tension:

(1) *The "displacement" of the site where power seizes life*. When political strategies wager on the qualities of the human species, they do so at the level of genetic manipulation and at the level of the survival of the species.[2] Indeed the latter can become the principal reason for armed intervention by the great powers. Another reason for this displacement will be found when we recognize that disease threatens the human species, which in turn wages an unprecedented fight against it. This struggle does not simply pertain to human beings and to their by-now-codified nature, but rather to administrative, scientific, and commercial projects that are intended to better biological life (a positive form of eugenics).

(2) *The shift and the transformation of the modality or, rather, the stigma of power.* Power, always less juridical in the sense of general and abstract law, now tends to dissolve into the norm, that is, into the shared, immanent rule of effective praxis or active participation. It is not about demystifying the rhetoric of the law. Today political power easily adopts the language of normalization, management, and control; not the dyad of exclusion/repression, but rather a margin of tolerance that can be seen in emergency management and risk-oriented government.

At the center of this tension between politics and life lies the new site of the living, ambivalent body. Irreducible to the classic rights of the past, a right to life [*diritto alla vita*] takes hold and transforms the chances [*alea*] of life, death, and disease, into a site of artifice. This right is claimed in its generic ambiguity and in turn fastened to the "living body" and to its biological cycle, which until recently was merely random and contingent. Thus the right to life explodes an already ambiguous notion of "human rights." The access of the ill to medical treatment in poor countries, against AIDS for instance, calls upon the living body as a generic threshold; an ethical and sacred limit that disavows and forbids differences on this surviving and anonymous body. This right is sealed on just such a passive and sentient body, and so a corporeal indefiniteness extends to all of humanity, one that explodes the alternative between formal rights and real rights, freedom as a right and credit as a right through which human rights are interpreted.

Simultaneously, however, this same generic body that is merely alive presupposes its own capacity of choice and artificial and technical modification. It becomes a *cyborg,* which, by hybridizing a nonhuman otherness, rewrites its own identity in new terms. This doesn't occur, however, without raising new, more serious ambiguities. In order to proceed further in my overview, I want to follow the lead of Foucault and Arendt, both of

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2. "But what might be called a society's 'threshold of modernity' has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies." [Foucault, History of Sexuality *143].*

whom theorized the politics of modernity as the politics of how to govern life. They will provide us with some useful fragments with which to continue these reflections.[3]

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The life of the species becomes the direct object of politics in modernity. It is modernity that witnesses the entrance of life into the domain of politics as an object of care, which is to say when bodies emerge as the subject and object of expansive and productive strategies. The point of departure is the classic distinction between *zōē* and *bios*. *Zōē,* on the one hand, is bare life, the life we share with animals, and the horizon of necessity that links human beings to mere survival, to what Aristotle called "the nutritive life," that is, the power of self-preservation and resistance to death. *Bios,* on the other hand, refers to life that has form, which is to say, to that form of life which is specifically human and in which politics takes place. In Greece, *zōē,* or biological life, was excluded from the political. Producing and consuming the means of sustenance as well as the reproduction of the species—hence work and family—are subject to necessity; they engender relationships of dependence, inequality, and nonfreedom. It is exactly this biological life that takes center stage in the new modern space, a life whose needs are common to the entire species. It is a site in which work, production, and family are bound by the constraints of nonchoice and of the struggle to survive when resources are scarce.

The predatory nobility that remained untroubled by vital necessity now fades, while a new social corpus is born: a hybrid of public and private that is crowded with people who demand protection, security, government, and administration so as to produce, reproduce, and hence survive, and by so doing to increase life. Politics is transformed into police action and the accumulation of wealth. In this interpretation, the access of bourgeois society to the political—a society of production and of labor—implies seeing the political as predominantly related to governing life. Despite, or paradoxically precisely through democratic-participative legitimization, bourgeois society moves toward depoliticization; power retreats as a direct exercise in favor of the request for "good government": the wise administration of goods and the protection of the health of the "body" politic that increases its productivity and reproductivity and so guarantees its security.

Arendt provocatively denounces how this incremental government of life in reality depends on the nonmediated radicality of the binary life/death. She shows how the concept of life itself is antipolitical and only given in relation to death. Since the centrality of life implies a depoliticization and a devaluation of forms and is dangerously oriented toward the tragedy of totalitarianism, human beings without political form are those who may be killed [*uccidibili*].[4] Is Arendt right? What does modern biopolitical interest [in life] have to do with bare life? It is certainly true that biopolitics, as a feature of modern power, does not clearly exhibit the nexus of bare life and the capacity to be killed [*uccidibilità*], which is one that characterizes sovereignty and its power of life and death.[5]

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3. See in particular Foucault's's History of Sexuality *as well as his "The Birth of Social Medicine." Hannah Arendt doesn't explicitly address biopolitics, but a large section of* The Human Condition *is dedicated to political life [see esp. 7–21; 38–58; 73–78; 289–325].*

4. [For the translation of the terms uccidibili *and* uccidibilità, *I have referred to Daniel Heller-Roazen's translation of the terms in Agamben's* Homo Sacer. *—Trans.].*

5. Agamben in Homo Sacer *argues that the originary character of any form of power undergirds the paradigm of sovereignty. Since its object is biological life, sovereignty always encompasses* potestas vitae ac necis. *In this interpretation, any political organization relies on the exclusion of bare life, a life that is not determined politically, and which becomes capable of being killed and which may be killed, as life without value, in perfect symmetry with the inclusive character of the*

On the contrary, biopolitics concentrates on caring for the living (what Foucault calls "the power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death" [*History of Sexuality* 138]. Yet Arendt denounces the unmediated, reductive, and antipolitical sense of life, when caring for life is viewed as the supreme good, given its association with regimes of necessity and nonchoice, as well as its temporality, which subsumes every productive human act in an enormously intensified vital process of absolute and mundane futility. It aims at devouring and consuming any durable thing.

It is also true that when the dialectical radicality of life/death and survival/annihilation is at stake no form of politics is given [*non si dà forma di politica*]. The "social question," which today extends to the entire globe—now understood as the "hunger" of the mob [*plebe*] and multitudes which besiege public space—imposes a priority of providing biological necessities that cannot be put off. It also seems to do away with that praxis of possibility and surplus which is what politics ought to be about. When the cyclical metabolism of life occupies the entire public space, a space in which the circle of production and consumption cannot be broken, we are ruled by necessity and survival, which is neither human nor politically free. Thus we first need to meditate on the privatizing and charitable turn of the Welfare State. The Welfare State consolidates the inequality between power and users and prevents a debate that might transform even the vital questions of survival into a *public* question in which subjects have powers, where they have the power of decision as well as the power of giving and taking without existing as mere consumers and welfare beneficiaries. The problem of welfare, and therefore of the biopolitical and of the political that centers around life, well-being, health, and survival, is really about deemphasizing a private orientation to life and then of thrusting it into the public realm while questioning the complex sense of the social contract.[6] Yet this implies the *empowerment* of subjects and an increase in biopower, which is organized and regulated through diversified and personalized devices. The indefiniteness of needs, which would seem to open up to "forms" of the public, is transformed, through the ambiguity of the body—which, after all, is singular—into a specificity of demands and of different expectations that unsettle the formality and the bureaucracy of the welfare system.

This pervasiveness of the biological in the realm of the political extends to the democratizing and socializing processes of politics and so therefore to what is considered the nondisputable form of legitimizing democratic regimes. Here Arendt is clearly provocative. The pervasiveness of the biological finds paradoxical sanction and incentive in declarations of human rights, which is to say in the foundations of modern democracies. Here a presumed "naturalness" or generic "humanity" is superimposed on rights based on a conventional and artificial political pact. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* Arendt writes bitingly of this presumed humanity, reminding us of how desperate is the condition of those who cannot affirm but the "bare fact" of being nothing other than human. It is in this respect that she forcefully reclaims the form of life, *bios,* as "the right to have rights,"

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*juridical order [*ordinamento *8n1]. The life included is* bios, *which is to say life that is determined, governed, and protected so as to increase it. Perhaps not everything in this perspective can be agreed upon—even though reality seems at times to brutally confirm it—especially because of the univocal image of power it presents. Yet we can use the meaning that* zōē *comes to take on in Agamben's analysis. Bare life is not there; it is rather the limit of the political theorized as inclusion, as determination, and therefore as form. The pertinence of the concept of bare life to the capacity to be killed or to death itself explicates the nondefinable trait of life itself that cannot be defined but in relation to its absence, death.*

6. The term "privatizing" does not refer here to the opening up of the social services to private management and entrepreneurship, but refers instead to a feature that is also shared by the Welfare State, that of establishing a privatizing, unequal, dual, and bureaucratic/charitable relationship with its users, while legitimizing itself through rights. Thus it promotes the biopolitical, charitable, and asymmetric reproduction of the social relation. In this regard, see de Leonardis.

that is as the right to be a citizen [see Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* 267–89]. The ambiguity of human rights lies precisely in their antipolitical and moral nature, which therefore dangerously devalues the forms of the political.

3

Where power seizes life now intersects with the shift in the modality of power. The general and abstract law is weakened while the immanent, regulative norm is strengthened. Making politics ethical implies the presence of power and of legitimizing devices that are collected [*introitati*] together in a way that always pushes forward in an immanent transcendence that integrates sovereign power and biopower. This occurs precisely by upholding what is held "in common" beyond individual differences: the corporeal, the vital, and the biological. Aiming more at organization than at vertical, general, and abstract command, this coordinative power tends to be articulated in devices that are simultaneously diversified, personalized and all-absorbing; devices that opt for normalization. They effectively incite, reinforce, and increase the subdued forces, while at the same time strengthening certain kinds of habits. This power acts through rules of organization, through flexible and modular rules that confer more power.

The process whereby politics is socialized therefore carries with it the evident weakening of the sovereign nexus of obedience/disobedience and exclusion/inclusion, in favor of a praxis of reciprocal implication of the two terms. Here then we find the dialectic of immunization: a praxis, which regularizes while containing, weakens when not overcoming the decisive separation of sovereignty both within and without; a praxis that aims not at annihilating the enemy or danger, but rather at maintaining the enemy—at least until it is statistically vital—into the same corpus of the citizenry. It is an injection into the collective body of the mortal threat so as to complete the task of safeguarding life.

With regard to liberalism, its dialectic, as Foucault notes, moves simultaneously between producing freedom and consuming it on the part of those who by producing it limit it. The objective of wider freedom implies the mobilization of strategies of security. More freedom means more controls and more interventions, as well as more procedures to reduce freedom and its costs. Here too we may think of medical competence that eases suffering at the expense of giving smaller doses of suffering. Medicine supplies the technical and ideological support, the biopolitical example *per eccellenza,* for the development of the Welfare State as well as for creating consensus for programs of public hygiene. It controls, regulates, prohibits, and disciplines lifestyles, by winning cooperation of those who are being controlled; all attracted by a biopolitical project that they cannot say no to.

Now, this move from law to norm, from sovereign exclusion to immune implication, or from the imposition of the collected consent of the ruled (under the auspices of the generic and common welfare inherent to generic and common "life") poses serious problems of "resistance." On the one hand, we should not forget that normalization, even when referring to the making immanent of regulative power, nonetheless demands the application of a rule that excludes, delimits, and circumscribes the range of its productive-protective intervention (though clearly it eventually reintegrates statistically what it has excluded). Therefore, modern biopolitics never forgets its origin, which it brutally excludes, nor the division between living subjects and those for whom even simple survival would require too much effort and too many precautions—all of which suggests that we still cannot forgo the question of right and sovereignty.

We ought, though, to recall that the normalizing dynamic reveals a mingling of danger and protection and freedom and repression that makes it difficult to identify where

precisely these sites of "resistance" might be located. The neomaterialist vitalism seeks out those who resist in the folds of the subject/object of power, which is akin to desiring [a] life [*vita desiderante*] that resists and evades power.[7] We should be concerned, however, that this resistance, no matter how seductive it may be, is indebted to Romanticism, as well as being characterized by infrapolitical features. Furthermore, we need to recognize fully the contradiction of affirming life which arises against biopolitical life. We need to ask how effective immanent resistance can be against a power that seems continually to reject the glories of transcendence more every day. That is, how plausible is resistance if we have not entirely rethought the ubiquitous and immanent site of power? This, I am convinced, is possible only when we have returned to considering the mediations of politics. In other words, despite all the difficulties inherent therein, we need to recall the lesson Arendt taught us and begin to move toward political forms of life.

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We finally have arrived at the instance when the site of power's displacement and the shift in power's modality converge. No doubt about it: biopolitical power traverses bodies, and so any expansion of rights has, as its corollary, the increasing inscription of life in the realm of government. Yet the body is elusive. On the one hand, it is anonymous; it is the fungible site of the species; it is generic and as such is the chosen object of biopolitical power. On the other hand, it is the most singular singularity we have; it is an extreme singularity that cannot be exchanged for another. It is difference itself, and therefore it is in corporeality that the demands of a power for self-managing the body take hold; a power for the management of happiness and for satisfying needs, as well as the capacity and the possibility of finding one's expressive spontaneity against discipline, docility, and repression.

This has been the significance of the demands of feminist thought vis-à-vis the abstract subjectivity of he who holds rights in the liberal tradition. Feminist thought attempts to identify the singularity of a body with a memory that recounts itself autobiographically. This demand of expressive authenticity through the body and its difference can be considered—despite the postmodern aura that imbues it at certain points—as the extreme result of the "modern," anticommunitarian individuality that is the legitimizing site of politics.

The body, the flesh, becomes the leverage for a politics that would not be only one of government, management, and objectification [*governo-gestione-oggettivazione*], but rather one of power and difference. Still, we ought to remember what I noted above concerning the difficulties of a vitalistic and immanent resistance to the infrapolitical. In order for this singularity to be political, it has to be aware that its very existence cannot be bare life before any form. The projection which presents and recounts it as energy and life, that is as living body, forcibly deprives it of life, which is always *a way* of being a life, a possibility, and, why not, a power of "form." No pure factuality is possible that is not mediated by abstraction. Instead, different forms of life exist, and these forms are nonessences. Indeed they represent the multiple and heterogeneous actions of forces that move in the direction of the hybridization with otherness, artifice, and techniques that occur thanks to intentions, choices, and relations.

This is crucial. Neither biology nor anthropology can sketch the essence of the human before the constitutive relationship with what is outside, to that which opens to our

7. I am referring in particular to Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, to Braidotti's Nomadic Subjects, *and to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's* Empire. *See as well Negri's* Il biopolitico: L'antagonismo politico, la biomodificazione e la nuova frontiera della globalizzazione.

animality or vitality as "opening" and "feeling." It is *aesthesis*: the active reactivity or receptive-transformative passivity that *depends* on that which is other from the self. To the extent that it is dependent (and therefore removed from a divinely created and inauthentic mode of being), the human draws mimetic forms. It is therefore technique; it is art as artifice [see Bazzicalupo]. This implies a rethinking of identity as constitutively not insular: as metisse, as hybrid, and paradoxically as always *cyborg*.[8] Our capacities for life are [our] capacities for artifice, for putting ourselves in relation to that which is other from us: the human is not a given, but that which can be modified. We graft the other onto us inasmuch as we are capable of assimilating and metabolizing it. By virtue of this, the corporeal doesn't dissolve into the virtual or the technological, because body and life represent an active passivity, the mnestic and selective features of that creative assimilation.

What then becomes of bare life? We ought to recall first that what has been described thus far here is not bare life, but rather a discourse on bare life. With *biopolitical discourse,* power ideologically establishes a reductive paradigm that entails survival and necessity. It limits the space for discourse on forms of life and therefore on politics. Is life then absent, if it cannot speak itself [*non è in sè dicibile*]? Bare life "in itself" is revealed as a formidable limit-concept that is *nonpolitical*: it is the life of fungible, anonymous bodies, common to all sentient bodies that experience pain, hunger, loss, and deprivation. It is this limit-concept which is truly general, common, and universal. It is far more universal than those transcriptions of rights that have little to do with us, and that seem far removed from phenomenological diversity: universal rights that ought to allow the convergence of different cultures and to be the guide of moving ethics toward politics, were it not for its disregard for people as what they are. These "lofty rights" thtat float high above the corporeal exhibit a dangerous tendency to authorize the suffering of bodies in order to better glorify the spirit.

The site of our fragile common corporeality, that is, what cannot be separable from existence, what Burckhardt called the low margin of existence, can be called into question not as a nonpolitical site, but as an ethical one; ethical in a non-normative sense, as an ethics that puts a stop to the pervasiveness of the political and of difference; a site in which we could well imagine ourselves and our own bodies in the suffering and sentient bodies of others.

Translated by Clarissa Clò

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8. Cf. Haraway, Amselle, and more recently Marchesini.

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