

Sherryl Vint

Biodialectics

**Roberto Esposito. *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 304 pp. \$22.50.**

This is the first English translation of work by Roberto Esposito, one of the major figures in Italian biopolitical theory. Esposito's work is an intervention that tries to mediate between two dominant theorizations of the biopolitical in contemporary culture: a negative view which links biopolitics with expanding sovereign power and the paradigm of the concentration camp in the work of Giorgio Agamben (a thinker likely familiar to those interested in human-animal studies); and a positive view which connects biopolitics with the political energy of the multitude in the theory of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, thinkers less taken up in human-animal studies. Esposito's contribution to this debate is the paradigm of immunization, which he draws from the work of Jacques Derrida, and which functions for him as a model to explain the reciprocal relations between self and community. This mechanism can fail in two directions, either subsuming the individual in the community or emphasizing individualism to an antisocial degree. The paradigm of immunity mediates between these two extremes, both positing and negating community in a reciprocal and simultaneous movement: "rather than centered simply on reciprocity, community doubles upon itself, protecting itself from a presupposed excess of communal gift giving" (xi). Esposito's theorizations of biopolitics and community are potentially useful for thinking about the place of animals in human social and political structures, although Esposito himself does not address this topic. The most important contribution of his work in this respect is that it allows us to think about subjectivity beyond the paradigm of liberalism and its inherent emphasis on human exceptionalism.

Esposito makes his arguments by tracing a genealogy of sovereignty and community that is at the center of other recently translated works such as Foucault's *The Birth of Politics* (2008) and Derrida's *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2009). However, his interest in rethinking from the basis of new conceptions of ontology rather than those of epistemology places his work closer to that of Deleuze and Guatarri. It also, to my mind, makes it difficult to conceive of ways in which his provocative theorization of new models of community and subjectivity might be effectively mobilized in a context

in which neoliberal biopolitical governance shapes day-to-day life for both humans and animals in pervasive and pressing ways.

He begins with a critique of liberalism and disagrees with Foucault that the power of the sovereign over biological life is a feature, specifically, of modernity; rather, he argues, three kinds of biopower preceded the period Foucault addresses: organistic, anthropological, and naturalistic. What Foucault did bring to light, however, was the nexus of individuals/power/the law that grounds modernity, and further the constitutive character of war as the origin and limit of politics. Where Esposito differentiates himself from Foucault, however, is in the opportunities for action he sees as a consequence of this nexus. Foucault, he argues, reduces the dialectic of politics and life to a choice of “a politics of life or a politics over life” (32). In the first instance, life either holds politics back as their natural limit or else it becomes subject to politics, and all biological functions are shaped and controlled for specific political ends. In the second instance, politics *over* life, biopolitics is turned into thanato-politics in which an excess of sovereign power, now floating free of the figure of the sovereign, causes the end of many lives and perhaps threaten life itself.

Esposito turns to his paradigm of immunization as a way out of this binary. In it, life and politics – or, in his language, *bios* and *nomos* – “emerge as two constituent elements of a single, individual whole that assumes meaning from their interrelation” (45). In the choice of power of life or power over life, Esposito sees a fraught tension between a biopolitics that nurtures and advances a specific form of life it values and a sinister reverse impulse through which biopolitics destroys, excludes, and violates other forms of life. The complex enfolding of immunization presents a third way, a negative form of the protection of life: “it saves, insures, and preserves the organism, either individual or collective, to which it pertains, but it does not do so directly, immediately, or frontally; on the contrary, it subjects the organism to a condition that simultaneously negates or reduces its power to expand” (46). In this, Esposito is drawing on Hegel and the idea that the obstacle represented by the negation is simultaneously the source of the impulse for life to expand and develop. Life, he argues, is best understood as an example of this dialectical drive toward new synthesis which is encapsulated in the figure of immunization. Thus “*immunitas* is revealed as the negative or lacking [*privative*] form of *communitas*” (50): it is a defense against the expropriating/self-destroying features of community but also what pushes that community to new configurations. All historic civilizations had immunization paradigms, Esposito

contends, but in the modern age it is our “most intimate essence” (55): life “invents modernity as a historical and categorical apparatus able to cope with it” (55).

A limited and negative model of the relationship between life and politics has been our liberal philosophical heritage, and thus our concepts of sovereignty, property and liberty are both inadequate and the source of the current trend in biopolitics toward thanato-politics. Yet it need not be this way. Liberalism reduces these concepts “to the security of the subject who appears to be the owner or beneficiary,” but this “is not to be understood either as a contingent derivation or as a destiny fixed beforehand, but rather as the consequence of the modality of immunity through which the Modern thinks the figure of the subject” (56). The problems are threefold: a model of the social contract whose premise is the common vulnerability of all to be killed, producing the mutual and entwined emergence of individual rights and sovereign power; an understanding of property rooted in the sovereignty of the individual and the products of his labour, which too deeply entwines life with ownership, and produces a model of community as a zero-sum game of accumulation; and a notion of freedom that presupposes antagonism among individuals, in which “modern liberty is that which insures the individual against the interference of others through the voluntary subordination to a more powerful order that guarantees it” (72). The reconfiguration of liberty is the most crucial of Esposito’s interventions; against this model, he offers a notion of more ancient, communal liberty that lies at the heart of his paradigm of immunization.

Esposito contrasts the inadequacy of these categories of political formation with the power of life thought via another kind of ontology. Life is “always political,” he argues, not in terms of modernity’s “neutralizing mediation of immunitary nature” but “rather as an originary modality in which the living *is* or in which being *lives*” (81). He turns to Spinoza and Nietzsche, rather than to Hobbes and Locke, to offer another kind of philosophical foundation for social and political life (and a deep indebtedness to Deleuze is also evident, if not directly addressed in the text). Life as we understand it is stable and this is the problem; we need “something that is both more than life and other than life” (88) that can allow for superabundance and profusion pushed to an extreme, an excess. This concept of life is its real driving force, not a limited understanding of Darwinism as a teleology of survival of the fittest. Yet the risk is that life “freed from its restraints ... tends to destroy and to destroy itself” (88). Life should be “Pure relation and therefore absence or implosion of subjects in relation to each other: a relation without subjects” (89). It is the logical categories of modernity (identity, causality, non-contradiction) that create a situation in which the impulses of life turn on themselves: such categories “construct barriers, limits, and embankments with respect to that

common *munus* that both strengthens and devastates life, pushing it continuously beyond itself. The procedures of reason raise up an immunitary *dispositif* against that vortex that in essence we are" (90). Thus, the institutions of the state are all premised on the idea of the need to protect humans from the explosive power of vitality, of life unchanneled and unstructured. Nietzsche, calling for humans to promote a vital force by belonging to what is not, cultivating "the self-generating capacity that degeneration has progressively consumed" (100), moves from the figure of the wolf-man, exiled from the community in Hobbesian social theory, to that of a bacillus or tick "that sucks his blood and transmits it, now poisoned, to the rest of the species" (100). Esposito finds inspiration in this metaphor – although he does not himself explore in detail the common use of animal figures and what this means for the place of non-humans in the bios community – but transforms it from the fearful image of poisoning to a more positive one of beneficial, reciprocal infection in his notion of immunization.

In calling for the force of life to exceed its prescribed channels and for politics/community to overflow the boundaries of its current configuration, Esposito is – in common with other theorists of the posthuman whose work has been valuable to human-animal studies – calling for a rethinking of what it means to be human. When humans refuse to be what liberal philosophy has constituted as "the human," new possibilities emerge, including new models of the relationship between individual and community. Esposito is fond of the image of pregnancy, of a being that is both one and two, of an individual that is both inside and outside, "the exterior of the interior, the common of the immune" (108), to represent this possibility. Liberal philosophy, in contrast, has focused its energy on differentiating between binaries, specifically that between lives that matter and those that do not in biopolitical configurations. Esposito examines this through the frightening exemplar of Nazi policy, insisting upon the necessity of examining the full range of Nazi biopolitical interventions in conjunction with one another: thus, it is not merely the concentration camp that interests him, but also the related policies fostering specific kinds of German life. His immunitary model requires that we understand them as two sides of the same project that makes one the necessary condition of the other. The crucial criterion is a biopolitics that becomes about a policing of norms. He argues that the concept of abnormality or deficiency is impossible in nature: "What appears as the social result of a determinate biological configuration is in reality the biological representation of a prior political decision" (120); that is, the human institution of a norm produces the idea that some biology is so labelled, or, more accurately, so *is* (Esposito, recall, is interested in rethinking ontology).

In our liberal heritage, natural law and positive law become confused and conflated, and this is what produces thanato-politics.

Through an examination of literary texts that epitomize the split this produces in human cultures – such as *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and *Dracula* (1897) – Esposito traces a shift in the way the degenerate is thought of from “the other in man” to “the other from man” (126). The work of emerging eugenics biopolitics is “the task of translating these kinds of literary hallucinations into reality” (127). The model which links the body politic, the sovereign and the biological body conceptually now extends to a model in which the sick or diseased parts of said body need to be removed to promote life, thus rationalizing the mystifying logic of a biopolitics that protects life (in general) by destroying it (in particular). This is also confusion of the inside and outside, but not in the positive way Esposito suggests notions of life might be mobilized. Instead a discourse emerges about a life ‘not worth’ living, installing death in advance into certain lives, and “the result is the conceptual inversion that makes the victim himself the beneficiary of his own elimination. With birth constituting his illness, that is to say the fact of being born against the will of nature, the only way to save the defective person from such a subhuman condition is that of handing him over to death and thereby liberating him from an inadequate and oppressive life” (135). Thus, Esposito theorizes, what Germany tried to defeat in their murder of Jews and others was death itself, attempting to eliminate from its body politics those lives already marked by death and hence to expel death from its community altogether.

In his final chapter, Esposito argues that we are acting in a similar manner in the current political desire to protect the community from the threat of terrorism, preserving life by enacting death. The immunitary mechanism of community is now functioning in a suicidally excessive way, a kind of social autoimmune disorder: “Just as in the most serious autoimmune illness, so too in the planetary conflict presently under way; it is excessive defense that ruinously turns on the same body that continues to activate and strengthen it” (148). Esposito rejects both responses that suggest the only way to avoid repeating the horror of Nazism is to create a concept of the human “as distinguished from other animal life” (150) and the conceptual distinction between (human) political life and (animal) biological life important to Agamben’s theorizations and to the Heideggerian *Dasein*. He turns to phenomenology and specifically the work of Merleau-Ponty, whose theorization of the flesh offers an understanding of embodiment that short-circuits the body/body politic dynamic of liberalism: “Inscribing the threshold that unites the human species with that of the animal in the flesh of the world, but also the margin that joins the living and the nonliving, Merleau-Ponty contributes

to the deconstruction of that biopolitics that had made man an animal and driven life into the arms of nonlife" (161-162). This more inclusive notion of the flesh prevents the autoimmune disorder: "If everything is the body, nothing will rigidly define it, which is to say no precise immunitary borders will mark and circumscribe it" (166). He also reconfigures notions of birth so that heredity and transmission of the same (that is, the absence of defects) no longer drive the ideal of the body and the body politic. Instead, "The only way for life to defer death isn't to preserve it as such (perhaps in the immunitary form of negative protection), but rather to be reborn continually in different guises" (181).

Crucially, this ideal of unchallenged and unfixed vitality cuts through the Gordian knot of the relationship between individual and community, so that neither needs to be sacrificed for the other: "the individual (or better, the subject) that is produced by individuating itself is not definable outside of the political relationship with those that share the same vital experience, but also with that collective, which far from being its simple contrary or the neutralization of individuality, is itself a form of more elaborate individuation" (181-182). Finally, returning to Spinoza, Esposito argues for a new understanding of the norm in which it is not prescriptive but rather "the process of normativization is the never-defined result of the comparison and conflict between individual norms that are measured according to the different power that keeps them alive, without ever losing the measure of their reciprocal relations" (187). The norm, like the subject, is a flow, never a fixed point. Thus, "Completely normal isn't the person who corresponds to a prefixed prototype, but the individual who preserves intact his or her own normative power, which is to say the capacity to create continually new norms" (191). Such a figure is the source for a new and positive biopolitics, to counter the negative Nazi thanato-politics. In short, the functioning of the immune discourse works to immunize the community against attacking that which is other. Further, this model requires acknowledging the interdependence of all life – including human life – on other forms of life.

This is a valuable book for those interested in human-animal studies, although the abstract quality of Esposito's work may be frustrating for some. This is not a work of prescription or direct intervention, but rather one that challenges us to rethink entirely our models of sovereignty, community, property and subjectivity. Such an entire reconceptualization is difficult and can be disorienting. At the same time, however, it is clear that the liberal model of society has done much to further the oppression of

animals by humans, and thus the challenge posted by *Bios* is well worth taking up. A productive possibility for human-animal studies scholars to think about here is that this model enables us to think about animal subjects and our relation to all life, not just human life, through a paradigm other than one in which the animal is always tied to evolutionary notions of before mankind. Animals might, then, be thought of as after humanity or a new humanity. In particular, thinking through the immunitary mechanisms by which society attacks its others as an autoimmune disorder in which what is attacked is 'really' self could productively be deployed in further thinking about shared communities between humans and animals, such as those proposed in the work of Jennifer Wolch. In the theorization of the flesh, not the body, the human/animal distinction disappears along with all other norms. Where we might go from this starting point is a question human-animal studies scholars may well wish to ask.

### **Acknowledgement**

I'd like to thank Dr. David Fancy, whose discussions of this text during our reading group were very helpful in shaping my thinking about this book.