

"Bios," Immunity, Life: The Thought of Roberto Esposito

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BIOS, IMMUNITY, LIFE

THE THOUGHT OF ROBERTO ESPOSITO

TIMOTHY CAMPBELL

The name of Roberto Esposito is largely unknown in the US. Outside of a few Romance Studies departments who know him primarily for *Communitas: Origine e destino della comunità* (*Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of the Community*), the work of this Italian philosopher over the past twenty-five years remains completely untranslated into English. That his introduction to an Anglo-American audience takes place today with a volume of *Diacritics* dedicated to his thinking is in no small part due to the current (bio)political situation in which we find ourselves: the ever-increasing concern of power with the life biology of its subjects, be it US businesses urging, indeed forcing, workers to be more active physically so as to save on health-care costs, or the US government's attempts in the "war on terror" to endanger the lives of foreign nationals, "fighting them there" so as to "protect" US lives here.¹ Yet this politicization of biology, the biopolitics that forms the object of Esposito's most recent study, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, has a long and terrible history in the twentieth century. Indeed, *Bios* and with it Esposito's previous work, *Immunitas: Protezione e negazione della vita* (*Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*), may be profitably read as nothing short of a modern genealogy of biopolitics that begins and ends in philosophy.

In the following pages I want to sketch the parameters of this genealogy and Esposito's contribution to our current understanding of biopolitics, particularly as they relate to the conceptual centerpiece of *Bios*, what Esposito calls the "paradigm of immunization." Immunity of course has a long and well-known history in recent critical thought. Niklas Luhmann, for instance, placed immunity at the heart of his systems theory in his 1984 opus *Social Systems*; Donna Haraway deployed "an immune system discourse" in her seminal reading of postmodern bodies from 1988, while Jean Baudrillard in the early 1990s spoke of artificial sterilization compensating for "faltering internal immunological defenses" [85]. For them and for many writing today on immunity, the term quickly folds into autoimmunity, becoming the ultimate horizon in which contemporary politics inscribes itself. Others continued to discuss immunity throughout the 1990s—Agnes Heller most prominently, as well as Mark C. Taylor—but no one placed it more forcefully at the center of contemporary politics than did Jacques Derrida in a series of interviews and writings after the "events" of September 11. Speaking of autoimmunity aggression and suicidal autoimmunity, Derrida affiliates the figure of immunity with trauma and a repetition compulsion ["Auto-Immunity"]. As the reader will soon discover, much sets apart Esposito's use of immunity from that of Derrida as well as the others mentioned above, especially as it relates to Esposito's radical inversion of immunity in its communal antinomy and its effects on our understanding of biopolitics. In the first part, therefore, I trace where Esposito's use of the immunity paradigm converges and diverges with that of Derrida and others.

1. Or, when not "exposing" presumed terrorists, the US government force-feeds them to protect their lives [Mitchell 9]. An internal memo at Wal-Mart suggests, in order "to discourage un-healthy job applicants," that "Wal-Mart arrange for 'all jobs to include some physical activity (e.g., all cashiers do some cart-gathering)'" [Greenhouse and Barbaro].

In the second part I situate Esposito's thought more broadly within current American and European thinking on biopolitics. Here Michel Foucault's seminars from 1975 and 1976 on biopolitics and racism merit considerable attention, since it is precisely upon these discourses that Esposito will draw his own reflections in *Bios*. Then I turn to a comparison of Esposito's conceptualization of the immunitary paradigm with the work of another Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, and in particular with Agamben's elaboration of the state of exception from its origins in Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin. As I argue here, Esposito's elaboration of immunity in *Bios* as an *affirmative* biopolitics—a biopolitics based upon a politics of life (*biopotenza*, in Esposito's terms) as opposed to a politics over life (*biopotere*)—not only challenges Agamben's negative analysis of biopolitics, but also calls into question the antihistorical moves that characterize Agamben's association of biopolitics with the state of exception.² Esposito instead will argue for the modern origin of biopolitics in the immunizing features of sovereignty, property, and liberty as they emerge in the writings of Hobbes and Locke. Essentially, Esposito argues that an affirmative biopolitics can emerge only after a thoroughgoing deconstruction of the intersection of biology and politics that originates in immunity.³ Having sketched the parameters of immunity within the horizon of an affirmative biopolitics, I discuss the principal elements of Esposito's conceptualization of such a biopolitics and then conclude with a discussion of possible areas of contact between Esposito's thought and contemporary public culture in the United States.

Community/Immunity

In order to appreciate the originality of Esposito's understanding of biopolitics, I first want to rehearse community's relation to immunity as Esposito sketches it in *Bios* as well as his two earlier works, *Communitas* and *Immunitas*. Reading the terms dialectically, Esposito asks if the relation between community and immunity is ultimately one of contrast and juxtaposition, or rather if the relation isn't part of a larger move in which each term is inscribed reciprocally in the logic of the other. The launching pad for his reflections concerns the principles on which communities are founded. Typically of course when we think of community, we immediately think of the common, of that which is shared among the members of a group. So too for Esposito: community is inhabited by the communal, by that which is not my own, indeed that which begins where "my own" ends. It is what belongs to all or most and is therefore "public in juxtaposition to 'private,' or 'general' (but also 'collective') in contrast to particular" [*Communitas* xii]. Yet Esposito

2. The "Works Cited" contains an extensive bibliography of Esposito's works in political philosophy.

3. I would be amiss if I didn't also note the competing notion of biopolitics that emerges in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire and Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. In fact one might well argue that Esposito's project of an affirmative biopolitics shares a number of points of contact with Hardt and Negri, especially in their shared interest in the phenomenological category of flesh as one basis for thinking a future biopolitics. Still, their differences may be subsumed around Esposito's implicit charge that Hardt and Negri's reading of the multitude and the notion of the common is riven by the same immunitary aporia that characterizes Agamben's negative biopolitics. Esposito essentially asks, in what way does the biopolitical multitude escape the immunitary aporia that resides at the heart of any creation of the common? His answer, never stated explicitly, is that folding biopower into the social in no way saves Hardt and Negri from the long and deadly genealogy of biopolitics in which life is protected and strengthened through death, in what Esposito calls the "enigma" of biopolitics. I develop this line of inquiry in the extended introduction I provide to *Bios*. On this note, the reader is directed to chapter 2 of *Bios* and those pages he devotes to biopower and biopolitics in Foucault.

notes three further meanings of *communitas*, all associated with the term from which it originates: the Latin *munus*. Two meanings of *munus*—*onus* and *officium*—pertain to obligation and office, while the third centers paradoxically around the term *donum*, which Esposito glosses as a form of gift that combines the features of the previous two. Drawing on the classic linguistic studies of Benveniste and Mauss, Esposito marks the specific tonality of this communal *donum* to signify not simply any gift but a category of gift that requires, even demands, an exchange in return. “Once one has accepted the *munus*,” Esposito writes, then “one is obliged to return the *onus*, in the form of either goods or services (*officium*)” [xiii]. *Munus* is, therefore, a much more intense form of *donum*, since it requires a response from the receiver.

At this point Esposito can distill the political connotations of *munus*. Unlike *donum*, *munus* subsequently marks “the gift that one gives, not the gift that one receives,” “the contractual obligation one has vis-à-vis the other,” and finally “the gratitude that *demand*s new donations” on the part of the recipient [xiv; emphasis in original]. Here Esposito’s particular understanding of community becomes clear: thinking community through *communitas* will name the gift that keeps on giving, a reciprocity in the giving of a gift that doesn’t—indeed, cannot—belong to oneself. At its (missing) origin, *communitas* is constructed around an absent gift, one that members of a community cannot keep for themselves. According to Esposito, this debt or obligation of gift-giving operates as a kind of originary defect for all those belonging to a community. The defect revolves around the pernicious effects of reciprocal donation on individual identity. Accepting the *munus* directly undermines the capacity of the individual to identify himself or herself as such and not as part of the community.

I want to hold the defective features of *communitas* in reserve for the moment and reintroduce the question of immunity since it is precisely the immunitary mechanism that will link community to biopolitics.⁴ For Esposito, immunity is coterminous with community. It does not simply negate *communitas* by signifying protection from what is outside, but rather is inscribed in the horizon of the communal *munus*. Immune is he—and immunity is clearly gendered as masculine in the examples from classical Rome that Esposito cites—who is exonerated or has received a *dispensatio* from reciprocal gift-giving. He who has been freed from communal obligations or who enjoys an originary autonomy or successive freeing from a previously contracted debt enjoys the condition of *immunitas*. The relationship immunity maintains with individual identity emerges clearly here. Immunity connotes the means by which the individual is defended from the “expropriative effects” of community, protecting the one who carries it from the risk of contact with those who do not (the risk being precisely the loss of individual identity) [*Bios* 47]. As a result, the borders separating what is one’s own from the communal are reinstated when the “substitution of private or individualistic models for communitarian forms of organization” takes place [47]. It follows that the condition of immunity signifies both “not to be and not to have in common” [48]. Seen from this perspective, immunity presupposes community, but also negates it, so that rather than centered simply on reciprocity, community doubles back upon itself, protecting itself from a presumed excess of communal gift-giving. For Esposito, the conclusion can only be that “to survive, a community, every community is forced to introject the negativity of its own opposite, even if that opposite remains a contrastive and lacking mode of the community itself” [49]. It is this introjection of negativity or immunity that will form the basis of Esposito’s reading of modern biopolitics. Esposito will argue that the idea of the modern subject who enjoys civil and political rights is itself an attempt to attain immunity from the contagion of the possibility

4. Cf. chapter 2 in *Communitas, dedicated to guilt*: “Community is definable only on the basis of the lack from which it derives and that inevitably connotes it precisely as an absence or defect of community” [33].

of community. Such an attempt to immunize the individual from what is common ends up putting the community at risk as immunity turns upon itself and its constituent element.

Immunity and Modernity

Those familiar with Jean-Luc Nancy's writings on the inoperative community or Alphonso Lingis's reflections on the shared nothingness of community will surely hear echoes of both in much of the above synopsis.⁵ What sets Esposito's analysis apart from them is the degree to which he reads immunity as a historical category inextricably linked to modernity.

That politics has always in some way been preoccupied with defending life doesn't detract from the fact that beginning from a certain moment that coincides exactly with the origins of modernity, such a self-defensive requirement was identified not only and simply as a given, but as both a problem and a strategic option. This means that all civilizations past and present faced and in some way met the needs of their own immunization, but that only in the modern ones does immunization constitute its core element. One might come to assert that it wasn't modernity that raised the question of the self-preservation of life, but that self-preservation raises itself in modernity's being [essere], which is to say it invents modernity as a historical and categorical apparatus that is capable of coping [risolvere] with it. [Bios 52]

For Esposito, modernity doesn't begin merely in the institution of sovereign power and its theorization in Hobbes as Foucault argues. Rather, modernity appears precisely when it becomes possible to theorize a relation between the communitarian *munus*, which Esposito associates with a Hobbesian state of generalized conflict, and the institution of sovereign power that acts to protect or, better, to immunize the community from a threatened return to conflict.

If we were to extend Esposito's argument, it would be more appropriate to speak of the sovereign who immunizes the community from the community's own implicit excesses: the desire to acquire the goods of another, and the violence implicated in such a relation. When its individual members become subject to sovereign power—that is, when it is no longer possible to accept the numerous threats the community poses to itself and to its individual members—the community immunizes itself by instituting sovereign power. With the risk of conflict inscribed at the very heart of community, consisting as it does in interaction, or perhaps better, in the equality between its members, immunization neither precedes nor follows the moment of community, but appears simultaneously as its essence. The moment when the immunitary aporia of community is recognized as

5. What Esposito has done, it seems to me, is to have to drawn on Nancy's arguments in *The Inoperative Community* regarding precisely the excessive nature of community vis-à-vis the metaphysical subject. Nancy writes that "community does not weave a superior, immortal, or transmortal life between subjects . . . but it is constitutively, to the extent that it is a matter of 'constitution' here, calibrated on the death of those whom we call, perhaps, wrongly, its 'members' (inasmuch as it is not a question of organism)" [14]. Esposito demonstrates instead that the calibration of which Nancy speaks doesn't just involve the future deaths of the community's "members," but also revolves around the mortal threat that the other members represent for each other. It is precisely this threat and the calls for immunization from it that explain why so many have in fact made the question of community "a question of organism." Or better, it is precisely the unreflected nature of community as organism that requires deconstruction. Only in this way will the biopolitical origins of community be made clear via community's aporia in immunity.

the strategic problem for nascent European nation-states signals the advent of modernity, since it is then that sovereign power is linked theoretically to communal self-preservation and self-negation.⁶

Two further reflections ought to be made at this point. First, by focusing on the immunizing features of sovereignty as it emerges in modernity, Esposito takes issue with a distinction Foucault makes between the paradigm of sovereignty and that of governmentality. We recall that for Foucault, governmentality marks the “tactics of government which make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence of the State and what is not, the public versus the private, and so on” [“Governmentality” 103]. These tactics are linked to the emergence of the population as an object of power, which culminates at the end of the eighteenth century, particularly regarding campaigns to reduce mortality [see Dean]. A full-fledged regime of governmentality for Foucault cannot be thought separately from the emergence of biopower that takes control of “life in general — with the body as one pole and the population as the other” in the nineteenth century [*Society Must Be Defended* 253]. Esposito, however, shows how Foucault oscillates between sovereignty and governmentality precisely because of his failure to theorize the immunitary declension of both terms. Both are inscribed in a modern biopolitical horizon thanks to a modernity that strengthens exponentially its own immunitary characteristics.

Second, Esposito’s focus on immunity ought to be compared to recent attempts, most notably by Judith Butler, to construct a conceptual language for describing gender and sexuality as modes of relation, one that would “provide a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well” [*Precarious Life* 24].⁷ Esposito’s language of an always already immunized and immunizing *munus* suggests that while Butler is clearly right in affirming the importance of relationality for imagining community, any hoped-for future community constructed on “the social vulnerability of bodies” will founder on the implicit threat contained in any relation among the same socially constituted bodies [*Precarious Life* 20]. In other words, an ecology of socially interdependent bodies doesn’t necessarily ensure vulnerability, but might actually augment calls for protection — thus the frequent suggestion of immunity in Butler when the body appears in all its vulnerability or the threat of contagion is symbolically produced by the presumed enemy.⁸ For his part, Esposito is attempting something different: the articulation of a political semantics that can lead to a nonimmunized (or radically communitized) life [“Introduzione” 1].⁹

6. Rossella Bonito Oliva’s analysis of the immunization paradigm is apropos: “The route of a mature modernity . . . unbinds the originarity of the relation [between zoon and the political] and makes immanent the reasons of “living with” [cum-vivere], which is always assumed as a subsequent and therapeutic step for the condition of solitude and the insecurity of the individual” [78].

7. See as well Butler’s discussion of the opacity of the subject: “The opacity of the subject may be a consequence of its being conceived as a relational being, one whose early and primary relations are not always available to conscious knowledge. Moments of unknowingness about oneself tend to emerge in the context of relations to others, suggesting that these relations call upon primary forms of relationality that are not always available to explicit and reflective thematization” [Giving an Account of Oneself 20].

8. Butler does come close to Esposito’s position when describing the violent, self-centered subject: “Its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multilateral relations. . . . It shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features ‘other to itself’” [*Precarious Life* 41].

9. Lest I appear to reduce their respective positions to a Hobbesian declension of biopolitics in Esposito and a Hegelian search for recognition in subject positions in Butler, each does recognize

Yet Esposito's diagnosis of the current biopolitical scene doesn't rest exclusively on a reading of the antinomies of community in immunity or for that matter on the modern roots of immunization in the institution of sovereignty. In *Bios* and *Immunitas*, Esposito sketches the outlines of a global autoimmunity crisis that grows more lethal by the day. The reason, Esposito argues, has primarily to do with our continuing inability to appreciate how much of our current political crisis is the result of a collective failure to interrogate the immunitary logic associated with modern political thought. In somewhat similar fashion, Derrida also urged forward an autoimmunity diagnosis of the current political moment, beginning in his writings on religion with Gianni Vattimo, then in *The Politics of Friendship*, and most famously in his interviews in the aftermath of September 11. I want to summarize briefly how Derrida conjoins politics to autoimmunity so as to distinguish Esposito's own use of the term from Derrida's. Setting out their differences is a necessary step to understanding more fully the contemporary formation of power and what strategies are available to resolve the current moment of political autoimmunity crisis.

In "Faith and Knowledge," his contribution to his and Gianni Vattimo's volume *Religion*, Derrida utilizes the optic of immunity to describe a situation in which religion returns to the forefront of political discourse. Interestingly, the change will be found in religion's relation to immunity. For Derrida (auto)immunity names the mode by which religion and science are reciprocally inscribed in each other. And so any contemporary analysis of religion must begin with the recognition that religion at the end of the millennium "accompanies and precedes" what he calls "critical and tele-technoscience reason," or better, those technologies that decrease the distance and increase the speed of communications globally, which he links to capitalism and the Anglo-American idiom [44]. The same movement that makes religion and tele-technoscience coextensive results in a countermove of immunity. Drawing upon the etymological roots of *religion* in *religio*, which he associates with repetition and then with performance, Derrida shows how religion's iterability presupposes the automatic and the machinelike; in other words, presupposes a technique that marks the possibility of faith. Delivering technique (technology) over to a faith in iterability shared with religion allows him to identify the autoimmunitary logic underpinning the current moment of religious revival and crisis. He writes: "It [the movement that renders religion and tele-technoscientific reason] secretes its own antidote but also its own power of auto-immunity. We are here in a space where all self-protection of the unscathed, of the safe and sound, of the sacred (*heilig*, holy) must protect itself against its own protection, its own police, its own power of rejection, in short against its own, which is to say, against its own immunity" [44].¹⁰

the need to muster some sort of new understanding of the changing conditions of what qualifies as life. For Butler that search is premised on the need to enlarge "the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved"; hence the importance she places on narratives of multilateralism and changing the normative schemes of what is or isn't human proffered by the media [Precarious Life xiv]. For his part, Esposito chooses to focus on the process of individualization that occurs at both the individual and collective level, arguing that "if the subject is always thought within the form of bios, bios in turn is inscribed in the horizon of a cum [with] that makes it one with the being of man" [Bios 199]. The title Bios comes into its own here as a term that marks the vital experiences that the individualized subject shares and has "in common" politically with others. Esposito's excursus on life as a form of birth that he elaborates in the fifth chapter may in fact be read as a necessary preface for the kind of changed recognition protocols related to grieving that Butler herself is seeking.

10. Cf. in this regard the pages Foucault devotes to the theme in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, especially 120–21; 182–85. My thanks to Adam Sitze for pointing out the important connections between the category of biopolitics and these seminars.

In the context of the overlapping fields of religion and tele-technoscientific reason, immunity is always autoimmunity for Derrida and hence always destructive. It is immunal because on the one hand, religion—he will substitute the term *faith* repeatedly for it—cannot allow itself to share performativity with tele-reason as the effects of that same reason inevitably lead to an undermining of the basis for religion in tradition, that is, in maintaining a holy space apart from its iterable features. Furthermore, it is autoimmunal to the degree that the protection of the sacred space, the “unscathed” of the previous quote, is created thanks to the same iterability, the same features of performance that it shares with tele-technoscientific reason. The result is a protective attack against protection itself, or a crisis in autoimmunity.

Not surprisingly, religious (auto)immunity also has a biopolitical declension for Derrida, though he never refers to it as such. Thus in the mechanical principle by which religions say they value life, they do so only by privileging a transcendental form of life. “Life” for many religions, Derrida writes, “is sacred, holy, infinitely respectable only in the name of what is worth more than it and what is not restricted to the naturalness of the bio-zoological (sacrificeable)” [51]. In this, biological life is repeatedly transcended or made the supplement religion provides to life. So doing, transcendence opens up the community, constitutively formed around the living, to the “space of death that is linked to the automaton [. . .] to technics, the machine, prosthesis: in a word, to the dimensions of the auto-immune and self-sacrificial supplementarity, to this death drive that is silently at work in every community, every *auto-co-immunity*” [51; emphasis in original]. For Derrida (as for Esposito) the aporia of immunity operates in every community, based upon “a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection” [51].¹¹ At the origin of religious immunity lies the distinction between bio-zoological or anthro-theological life and transcendental, sacred life that calls forth sacrifices in almost parasitical form so as to protect its own dignity. If there is a biopolitical moment to be found in Derrida’s analysis of religion and autoimmunity, it will be found in this difference between biological life and transcendental life that will continually require that this difference be maintained. Despite the contemporary context that informs Derrida’s analysis, this conceptual aporia precedes the discussion of capitalism, life, and late twentieth-century technology. Writing in “Faith and Knowledge,” Derrida gestures to these changes, but to the degree that his analysis of the resurgence of religion is thought as a political discourse, autoimmunity cooriginates with religion in the West.

Whether the same holds true in the political dimension, Derrida doesn’t actually answer, at least not in his important work from 1997, *The Politics of Friendship*. There instead, after the requisite footnote marking the debt he owes Blanchot, Bataille, and Nancy, Derrida emphasizes a different political declension of (political) community, one based on a friendship of separation undergirding philosophical attempts to think a future community of solitary friends. He writes:

Thus is announced the anchoritic community of those who love in separation. . . . The invitation comes to you from those who can love only at a distance, in separation. . . . Those who love only in cutting ties are the uncompromising friends of solitary singularity. They invite you to enter into this community of social disaggregation [déliasion], which is not necessarily a secret society, a conjuration, the occult sharing of esoteric or crypto-poetic knowledge. The classical concept of the secret belongs to a thought of the community, solidarity, or the sect—initiation or private space which represents the very thing the friends

11. Cf. Thomson’s recent intervention on Derrida and politics, entitled “What’s to Become of ‘Democracy to Come’?”

who speak to you as a friend of solitude have rebelled against. [35; emphasis in original]

Here a different form of political relationship emerges, one linked to Bataille's "community of those without community," and one at least initially distinct from the autoimmunizing features of religion. Derrida suggests as much with his gesture here to those separate entities, whose very separateness functions as the invitation to the common.¹² At the same time Derrida does preface the remarks with the adjective *anchoritic*, thereby associating the form of distant love afforded those who have withdrawn for religious reasons from the world with a political dimension. Derrida suggests that in the separateness of singularity it may be possible to avoid some of the immunizing features of community that emerged with his discussion on faith.

If I have focused initially on these two pieces in an introduction to Esposito's thought, it is because they inform much of Derrida's important reflections on global autoimmunity in the wake of September 11. Without rehearsing here all of the intricacies of his analysis, the reintroduction of the notion of autoimmunity into a more properly political discourse, both in his interviews with Giovanna Borradori after September 11 and in his later reflections on democracy in *Rogues*, show Derrida extending the autoimmune process to two related fronts: first, to a constituent "pervertibility of democracy" at the heart of defining democracy, and second, to the suicidal, autoimmune crisis that has marked American foreign policy since the 1980s. As for the first, democracy for Derrida appears to have at its heart a paradoxical meaning, one in which it both continually postpones the moment when it can be fully realized as the political government in which the many rule and simultaneously the possibility that when such an event comes, the many may precisely vote to suspend democracy. Writing with the recent experience of 1990s Algeria in mind, Derrida argues that "democracy has always been suicidal" because there are always some who do not form part of the many and who must be excluded or sent off [*Rogues* 33]. The result, and it is one that we ought to keep in mind when attempting to think Esposito's understanding of community/immunity, is that "the autoimmune topology always dictates that democracy be *sent off* [*renvoyer*] elsewhere, that it be excluded or rejected, expelled under the pretext of protecting it on the inside by expelling, rejecting, or sending off to the outside the domestic enemies of democracy" [36]. For Derrida, autoimmunity is inscribed "right onto the concept of democracy" so that "democracy is never properly what it is, never *itself*. For what is lacking in democracy is proper meaning, the very [*même*] meaning of the selfsame [*même*] . . . the it-self [*soi-même*], the selfsame, the properly selfsame of the itself" [36–37]. A fundamental, constitutive lack of the proper marks democracy.

Esposito's analysis of the immunity aporia of community does, much like Derrida's analysis of democracy, implicitly evoke in community something like democracy, but we ought to be careful in linking the two discussions on autoimmunity too closely. Esposito clearly refuses to collapse the process of immunization into a full-blown autoimmune suicidal tendency at the heart of community. That he doesn't has to do primarily with the larger project of which *Bios* and *Immunitas* are a part, namely how to think an affirmative biopolitics through the lens of immunity. Esposito's elaboration of a positive immunity evidenced by mother and fetus in *Immunitas* is proof that immunity doesn't necessarily degenerate—and that sense is hardly unavoidable in Derrida's discussion—into a suicidal autoimmunity crisis. In this, Esposito sketches the outlines of an affirmative model of

12. "Thus Deleuze's ultimate response to Hegel's argument against the 'richness' of immediacy is that the significance of the singular—'this,' 'here,' 'now'—is only grasped within the context of a problem, a 'drama' of thought that gives it sense, in the absence of which it is effectively impoverished" [*Stivale* 47].

biopolitical immunity, whereas rarely, if ever, does Derrida make explicit the conceptual language of biopolitics that undergirds his analysis.

But as I mentioned above, Derrida speaks of autoimmunity in a different context, one that characterizes American foreign policy after September 11 as essentially an autoimmune reaction to previous cold war policy that armed and trained former freedom fighters during the cold war's hot phase in Afghanistan in the early 1980s. He says:

Immigrated, trained, prepared for their act in the United States by the United States, these hijackers incorporate so to speak, two suicides in one; their own (and one will remain forever defenseless in the face of a suicidal, autoimmunitary aggression—and that is what terrorizes most) but also the suicide of those who welcomed, armed and trained them. ["Autoimmunity" 95; emphasis in original]

The soul-searching among the British in response to the bombings in London in the summer of 2005 is clearly proof of the correctness of Derrida's analysis; in the US a similar analogy might be found with the Oklahoma City bombings (though there was clearly less reflection in the US on the elements that contributed to that instance of suicidal immunity than in the United Kingdom). In any case by linking American foreign policy to suicide via autoimmunity, Derrida not only acknowledges an important historical context for understanding September 11 but implicitly links "these *hijackers*" to technical proficiency and "high-tech" knowledge and so, it would seem, to his earlier analysis of tele-reason and technology as reciprocally implicated in religious iterability. It might be useful to probe further the overdetermined connection of the "religious" in radical Islamic fundamentalism with just such a technological prowess. For the present discussion, however, what matters most is that Derrida believes that September 11 cannot be thought independently of the figure of immunity; indeed that as long as the US continues to play the role of "guarantor or guardian of the entire world order," autoimmunitary aggression will continue, provoked in turn by future traumatizing events that may be far worse than September 11.

How, then, does Esposito's reading of an immunological lexicon in biopolitics differ from Derrida's? First, where Derrida's emphasis falls repeatedly on autoimmunity as the privileged outcome of American geopolitics in the period preceding September 11, Esposito carefully avoids conflating immunity with autoimmunity; instead he repeatedly returns to the question of *munus* and modernity's attempts to immunize itself against the ever-present threat, from its perspective, of immunity's reversal into the communal; from immunization to communization.¹³ Writing at length in *Immunitas* on the imperative of security that assails all contemporary social systems and the process by which risk and protection strengthen each other reciprocally, he describes the autoimmunity crisis of biopolitics and with it the possibility of a dialectical reversal into community. "Evidently, we are dealing," Esposito writes, "with a limit point beyond which the entire biopolitical horizon risks entering into a lethal contradiction with itself." He continues:

This doesn't mean that we can turn back the clock, perhaps reactivating the ancient figures of sovereign power. Today it's impossible to imagine a politics that doesn't turn to life as such, that doesn't look at the citizen from the point of view

13. That said, it is true that with a different set of texts in hand a more "commun-ist" reading of Derrida emerges, namely Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International as well as Derrida's later texts on hospitality, in particular On Hospitality. Hent de Vries analyzes Derridean thought and hospitality as well in the last chapter of his Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida. My thanks to Miguel Vatter for drawing my attention to these more communitarian texts.

of his living body. But this can happen reciprocally in opposite forms that put into play the different meanings of biopolitics: on the one hand the self-destructive revolt of immunity against itself or the opening to its reversal in community.
[170]

Looking back today at the series of attempts after September 11 in the US to immunize the “homeland” from future attack—the term itself a powerful immunizing operator—it isn’t hard to imagine that we are in the midst of a full-scale autoimmunity crisis whose symptomatology Derrida diagnoses.

Yet a political autoimmunity crisis isn’t the only possible biopolitical outcome of the present moment. Esposito suggests that another possibility exists, one to which his own reading of biopolitics is directed, namely creating the conditions in which it becomes possible to identify and deconstruct the principal twentieth-century biopolitical, or better, thanatopolitical *dispositifs* that have historically characterized the modern immunitary paradigm. Only after we have sufficiently understood the extent to which our political categories operate to immunize the collective political body from a different set of categories associated with community can we reorient ourselves to the affirmative biopolitical opening presented by the current crisis in immunity. This opening to community as the site in which an affirmative biopolitics can emerge is the result of a dialectical reversal at the heart of the immunitary paradigm: once we recognize that immunization is the mode by which biopolitics has been declined since the dawn of modernity, the question becomes how to rupture the juncture between biology and politics, between *bios* and *politikos*. The necessary first step is moving away from a rationale of bodies when attempting to locate the object of politics, and so shifting the conceptual ground on which immunization depends. An affirmative biopolitics thought through the *munus* of community begins with the recognition that a new logic is required to conceptualize and represent a new community, a coming “virtual” community, Esposito will say with Deleuze, characterized by its impersonal singularity or its singular impersonality, whose confines will run “from men to plants, to animals independent of the material of their individuation” [*Bios* 214].

Biopolitics and Contemporary Italian Thought

The reference to a virtual, future community immediately recalls two other contemporary thinkers from Italy who are deeply engaged with the notion of biopolitics in its contemporary configuration. Of course I am speaking of Antonio Negri and Giorgio Agamben. That modern Italian political philosophy has emerged as perhaps the primary locus for research related to biopolitics is not happenstance. Few places have been as fertile for Foucault’s teachings, few places so well primed historically and politically to reflect on and extend his work. The reasons, it seems to me, have to do principally with a rich tradition of political philosophy in Italy—we need only remember Machiavelli, Vico, de Sanctis, Croce, and Gramsci, for instance—associated with the specificity of the Italian history and a political scene characterized by the immunizing city-state.¹⁴ Many other reasons may help explain it, but together what they spell is an ongoing engagement in Italy with politics thought in a biopolitical key.¹⁵

14. Cf. Andrea Cavalletti’s recent *La città biopolitica*, where he implicitly invokes the life of the city as one requiring protection. See as well my interview with Esposito in this issue of *Diacritics*.

15. Cf. too the recent, brilliant contributions of Simona Forti to discussions of biopolitics originating in Italy. In addition to her groundbreaking work from 2001 entitled *Totalitarismo*, see her stunning “*The Biopolitics of Souls: Racism, Nazism, and Plato*.” There she examines “the ambivalences that connect some of the assumptions of our philosophical tradition to Nazi totalitarianism” [10].

That said, the more one reads recent Italian contributions to biopolitics, the more two diverging lines appear to characterize them: one associated with the figure of Agamben and the negative tonality he awards biopolitics; the other a radically affirmative biopolitics given it in the writings of Michael Hardt and Toni Negri [see note 3]. In the following sections I want to focus on the implicit dialogue that runs throughout Esposito's writings with Agamben especially. What emerges in his analysis is a thorough critique of Agamben, especially his elaboration of biopolitics as principally negative. That both Esposito and Agamben begin their reflections from essentially the same series of texts—Foucault's series of lectures collected in English in *Society Must Be Defended* and the fifth chapter of *The History of Sexuality*—suggests that we ought to begin there for an initial definition of biopolitics before turning to their respective appropriations of Foucault.

For Foucault, biopolitics is another name for a technology of power, a biopower, which is to be distinguished from the mechanisms of discipline that emerge at the end of the eighteenth century. This new configuration of power aims to take “control of life and the biological processes of man as species and of ensuring that they are not disciplined but regularized [*Society Must Be Defended* 246–47]. The biopolitical apparatus includes “forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures,” in a word, “security mechanisms [that] have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize a state of life” [246]. As such, biopolitics is juxtaposed in Foucault's analysis to the power of sovereignty, leading to the important distinction between them: “It [biopower] is the power to make live. Sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power that I would call the power of regularization, and it, in contrast, consists in making live and letting die” [247]. Biopower thus is that which guarantees the continuous living of the human species. What turns out to be of almost greater importance for Agamben and Esposito, however, is the relation Foucault will draw between an emerging biopower at the end of the eighteenth century, often in opposition to individual disciplinary mechanisms, and its culmination in Nazism. For Foucault, what links eighteenth-century biopower to Nazi biopower is their shared mission in limiting the aleatory element of life and death. Thus, “[C]ontrolling the random element inherent in biological processes was one of the regime's immediate objectives” [246]. This is not to say that the Nazis simply operated one-dimensionally on the body politic; as Foucault notes repeatedly, the Nazis had recourse again and again to disciplinary power; in fact “no State could have more disciplinary power than the Nazi regime,” presumably because the attempts to amplify biopower depended upon certain concurrent disciplinary tools [259]. For Foucault, the specificity of the Nazis' lethal biopower resides in its ability to combine and thereby intensify the power directed both to the individual and the collective body.

Certainly other vectors criss-cross biopolitics in Foucault's analysis, and a number of scholars have done remarkable jobs in locating them, but the above outline is sufficient for describing the basis upon which Agamben and Esposito frame their respective analyses.¹⁶ Thus Agamben's notion of biopolitics is certainly indebted to the one sketched above—the impression that modernity produces a certain form of biopolitical body is inescapable reading Agamben, as it is implicit in Foucault. But Agamben's principal insight for thinking biopolitics concerns precisely the distinction between *bios* and *zōē* and the process by which he links the sovereign exception to the production of a biopolitical, or better, a zoopolitical body. Indeed, *Homo Sacer* opens with precisely this distinction:

The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word 'life.' They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: zōē, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods) and bios, which indicated the form or way of life proper to an individual or group. [1]

16. See especially Virno, Dean, Greenhalgh and Winckler, and Cutro.

Leaving aside for the moment whether in fact these terms exhaust the Greek lexicon for life, Agamben attempts to demonstrate the preponderance of $z\bar{o}\bar{e}$ for the production of the biopolitical body.¹⁷ The reason will be found in what Agamben following Carl Schmitt calls the sovereign exception, that is the process by which sovereign power is premised on the exclusion of those who are simply alive when seen from the perspective of the *polis*.¹⁸ Thus Agamben speaks of an inclusive exclusion of $z\bar{o}\bar{e}$ from political life, “almost as if politics were the place in which life had to transform itself into good and in which what had to be politicized were always already bare life” [7]. A number of factors come together to condition politics as the site of exclusion, but chief among them is the role of language, by which man “separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion” [8]. *Homo sacer* is precisely the political figure that embodies what is for Agamben the originary political relation: it is the name of the life excluded from the political life (*bios*) that sovereignty institutes; not so much an ontology of the one excluded (and therefore featuring an unconditional capacity to be killed), but more the product of the relation in which *bios* is premised not upon another form of life, but rather on $z\bar{o}\bar{e}$ (since $z\bar{o}\bar{e}$ is not by definition such a form) and its principal characteristic of being merely alive and hence killable.

In such a scheme, the weight afforded the classical state of exception is great indeed, and so at least initially biopolitics for Agamben is always already inscribed in the sovereign exception. Thus Agamben will deemphasize the Foucauldian analysis of the emergence of biopower in the late nineteenth century, since it represents less a radical rupture with sovereignty or for that matter a disciplinary society, and will instead foreground the means by which biopolitics intensifies to the point that in the twentieth century it will be transformed into thanatopolitics for both totalitarian and democratic states. Certainly a number of differences remain between the classic and modern models of biopolitics— notably the dispersal of sovereign power to the physician and scientist so that the *homo sacer* is no longer simply an analogue to the sovereign—and of course Agamben will go out of his way to show how the political space of modernity is in fact a biopolitical space linked to “the birth of the camps” [174].¹⁹ But the overwhelming impression is of a kind of flattening of the specificity of a modern biopolitics in favor of a metaphysical reading of the originary and infinite state of exception that has since its inception eroded the political foundations of social life. For Agamben, an authentically political *bios* always withdraws in favor of the merely biological.²⁰ The result is a politics that is potentially forever in ruins, in Marco Revelli’s description, or a politics that is always already declined negatively as biopolitical.

17. On this note see Laurent Dubreuil’s “Leaving Politics: Bios, $Z\bar{o}\bar{e}$, Life” in this issue of *Diacritics*.

18. Agamben discusses at length the relation among Schmitt, Benjamin, and the state of exception in *State of Exception*.

19. In this sense I agree with Erik Vogt’s view that Agamben “corrects” Foucault’s analysis. See his recent intervention in *Politics, Metaphysics and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer*.

20. Agamben does take up his analysis of modern biopolitics again in *The Open*, where what he calls the anthropological machine begins producing “the state of exception” so as to determine the threshold between the human and the inhuman. Yet to the degree the optic moves along the horizon of the state of exception, modernity and, with it, a nineteenth-century anthropological discourse remain wedded to a political (and metaphysical) aporia: “Indeed, precisely because the human is already presupposed every time, the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, a zone of indeterminacy in which the outside is nothing but the exclusion of an inside and the inside is in turn only the inclusion of an outside” [37].

Interestingly, Esposito's response to Agamben, indeed the initial steps he takes along the path to an affirmative biopolitics, begins not at the level of *homo sacer*, but rather with the figure of *genos*, in particular Esposito's striking reading of the *dispositifs* of Nazi thanatopolitics. Indeed the chapter on the cycle of *genos* in Nazism reads like an explicit dialogue with Agamben and his biopolitical interpretation of Nazism, as well as an implicit critique of Agamben's biopolitics. To see why, we need to rehearse briefly the chief lines of argument Esposito develops for working through the coordinates of Nazi biopolitics. Significantly, Esposito first pinpoints an oscillation in Foucault's reading of Nazism. On the one hand, Nazism for Foucault shares the same biopolitical valence with a number of modern regimes, specifically socialist, which Foucault links to a racist matrix. On the other hand, the mode by which Foucault frames his interpretations of Nazism privileges the singular nature of the "Nazi event," as Esposito calls it. The result is an underlying inconsistency in Foucault's reading: either Nazi biopolitics is inscribed along with socialism as racism, and hence is no longer a singular event, or it maintains its singularity when the focus turns to its relation to modernity.²¹

The second line will be found in Esposito's principal question concerning the position of life in Nazi biopolitics. "Why, unlike all other political forms past and present," he asks, "did the Nazis push the homicidal temptations of biopolitics to their full realization?" [45]. That his answer will move through the category of immunization suggests that Esposito refuses to superimpose Nazi thanatopolitics too directly over contemporary biopolitics.²² Rather, he attempts to inscribe the most significant elements of the Nazi biopolitical apparatus in the larger project of immunizing life through the production of death. In so doing, death becomes both the object and the therapeutic instrument for curing the German body politic; simultaneously the cause and the remedy of "illness." Esposito dedicates much of the final third of *Bios* to elaborating the immunizing features of Nazi biopolitics in order to reconstruct the move from a modern biopolitics to a Nazi thanatopolitics. The Nazi immunitary apparatus, he theorizes, is characterized by the absolute normativization of life, the double enclosure of the body, and the anticipatory suppression of life. Space doesn't allow me to elaborate further, though some of the most compelling pages of *Bios* will be found here. More useful is to ask where Esposito's overall portrayal of Nazi biopolitics diverges from that of Agamben in immunization. First, by focusing on the ways in which *bios* becomes a juridical category and *nomos* (law) a biologized one, Esposito doesn't directly challenge Agamben's reading of the state of exception as an *aporia* of Western politics, one the Nazis intensified enormously so that the state of exception becomes the norm. Rather, he privileges the figure of immunization as the ultimate horizon within which to understand Nazi political, social, juridical, and medical policies. In this sense he folds the state of exception into the more global reading of modern immunity *dispositifs*.

Implicit in the optic of immunity is a critique of the categories by which Nazism has been understood, two of which are sovereignty and the state of exception.²³ By privileg-

21. In a recent essay, Esposito pushes his reading of Foucault to a global reevaluation of the term totalitarianism. "Recognizing the attempt in Nazism, the only kind of its genre, to liberate the natural features of existence from their historical peculiarity, means reversing the Arendtian thesis of the totalitarian superimposition between philosophy of nature and philosophy of history. Indeed it means distinguishing the blind spot in their inassimiliability and therefore in the philosophical impracticability of the notion of totalitarianism" ["*Totalitarismo o biopolitica*" 62–63].

22. We ought to note that much of Esposito's critique of Foucault also holds true for Agamben. But where Foucault links socialism to Nazism via racism, Agamben joins a Nazi biopolitics to modern democracies through the state of exception. The result is, however, the same: to highlight Nazism's shared biopolitical features with contemporary democracies and so to lessen its singularity.

23. In this regard, see the entry for sovereignty in Esposito's *Nove pensieri sulla politica*.

ing the immunitary paradigm for an understanding of Nazi biopolitics, Esposito forgoes Agamben's folding of sovereignty into biopolitics (and so bypasses the *musulman* as the embodiment of the twentieth-century *homo sacer*), focusing instead on the biocratic elements of the Nazi dictatorship. He notes for instance the requirement that doctors had to sanction Nazi political decisions, which previously had been translated into the Reich's new legal codes, as well as the requirement that a physician be present in all facets of the workings of the concentration camp from selection to the crematoria. Esposito's analysis not only draws upon Robert Lifton's classic description of the Nazi State as a "biocracy," but more importantly urges forward the overarching role that immunization plays in the Nazis' understanding of their own political goals; indeed the Nazi politicization of medicine cannot be fully understood apart from the attempt to immunize the Aryan race.²⁴ Central, therefore, to Esposito's reading of the biopolitical tonality of the Nazi dictatorship is the recognition of the therapeutic goal the Nazis assigned the concentration camp: only by exterminating the Jews did the Nazis believe that the German *genos* could be strengthened and protected. And so for Esposito the specificity of the Nazi experience for modernity resides in the actualization of biology, when "the transcendental of Nazism" becomes life, its subject, race, and its lexicon, biological [*Bios* 117].²⁵

A Fortified Bios?

If these are the coordinates of Esposito's understanding of Nazi immunization, how then can we set about reversing the current thanatopolitical inflection of biotechnics and biopolitics that characterizes our own "threshold of modernity," to borrow Foucault's formulation? *Bios* provides a number of approaches but none more important than the elaboration of norm and immanence, or better, the immanent norm. Clearly Esposito is attempting to rethink the relation between norm and life in opposition to Nazi semantics by developing another semantics in which no fundamental norm exists from which the others can be derived. This is because "every kind of behavior brings with it the norm that places it within the more general natural order. That there are as many multiple individuals as infinite modes of substance will also mean that the norms will be multiplied by a corresponding number" [206]. Once the notion of individual no longer marks an individual subject but the process of individuation linked to the birth of all forms of life, our attention will then shift to producing a multiplicity of norms within the sphere of law. The individual will no longer be seen as simply the site in which previous genetic programming is executed, no mere hardware for a genetic software, but instead the space in which individuation takes place thanks to every living form's interdependence with other living forms. Norms for individuals will give way to individualizing norms that

24. "One can speak of the Nazi state as a 'biocracy.' The model here is a theocracy, a system of rule by priests of a sacred order under the claim of divine prerogative. In the case of the Nazi biocracy, the divine prerogative was that of cure through purification and revitalization of the Aryan race" [Lifton 17]. Lifton goes on to speak of biological activism in the murderous ecology of Auschwitz, which leads him to the conclusion that the "Nazi vision of therapy" cannot be understood apart from mass murder [18].

25. In *Immunitas* Esposito makes explicit his attempt to fold the notion of exception into that of immunization. Alluding to Agamben, Esposito notes that "the irreducibly antinomical structure of the *nomos basileus*—founded on the interiorization or better the 'internment' of an exteriority—is especially evident in the case of exception that Carl Schmitt situates in the 'most external sphere' of law" [37]. Here Esposito attempts to think immunity through a Benjaminian reading of law and violence, but elsewhere he notes that such a method is in fact Bataillian. See his *Categorie dell'impolitico* for the debt such a methodology owes George Bataille and the term *partage*: the liminal copresence of separation and concatenation [xxii].

respect the fact that the human body “lives in an infinite series of relations with others” [206]. Here, as elsewhere, Esposito is drawing on Spinoza for his elaboration of a new, nonimmunitary semantics of a multiplicity of norms, in which norms cannot be thought outside the “movement of life,” one in which the value of every norm is linked to its traducibility from one system to another. The result is the continual deconstruction of any absolute normative system, be it Nazi thanatopolitics or contemporary capitalist bioengineering of the human. The result is both a defense of difference among life forms with their associated norms and an explicit critique of otherness, which for Esposito inevitably calls forth immunization from the implicit threat of contagion and death.²⁶ The emphasis on difference (and not otherness) among life forms in the closing pages of *Bios* is linked to change, which Esposito sees not only as a prerogative of the living, but as the basis for elaborating a radical tolerance toward a world understood as a multiplicity of different living forms.

The question, finally, is how to fortify a life’s opening to other lives without at the same time inscribing it in an immunitary paradigm. For Esposito the answer lies in destabilizing the absolute immanence of the individual life, deemphasizing individual life in favor of an “indefinite life.” The reference to Deleuze’s last essay, “Pure Immanence,” allows Esposito to counterpose the absolute immanence of individual life to the absolute singularity of a “life.” Deleuze writes:

The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a “Homo tantum” with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral beyond good and evil, for it was only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things that made it good or bad. The life of such an individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life. [28–29]

Esposito’s excursus in *Bios* on individuation and birth as well as his appropriation of flesh from Merleau-Ponty spells out the conditions for the appearance of just such a singular *homo tantum*; implicit in the figure of the *homo tantum* is a “norm of life that doesn’t subject life to the transcendence of the norm, but makes the norm the immanent impulse of life” [214]. If we were to express such a figure biopolitically, the category of *bios* will name the biopolitical thought that is able to think life across all its manifestations or forms as a unity. There is no *zōē* that can be separated from *bios* since “every life is a form of life and every form is to be referred to life” [215]. Esposito here translates Deleuze’s singular life as the reversal of the thanatopolitics he sees underpinning the Nazi normative project, in which some lives were not considered forms and hence closed off from *bios*. The opening to an affirmative biopolitics takes place when we recognize that harming one part of life or one life harms all lives. The radical toleration of life forms that epitomizes Esposito’s reading of contemporary biopolitics is therefore based on the conviction that every life is inscribed in *bios*.

No greater obstacle to fortifying *bios* exists today than those biopolitical practices that separate *zōē* from *bios*, practices that go hand in hand with the workings of the immunization paradigm. Esposito seems to be suggesting that our opening to an affirmative biopolitics becomes thinkable only when a certain moment has been reached when a

26. Cf. Esposito’s reading of Arnold Gehlen in *Immunitas*: “For Gehlen, the other, more than an alter ego or a different subject is essentially and above all else a nonego; the ‘non’ that allows the ego to identify with the one who is precisely other from his own other” [123].

philosophy of life appears possible in the folds of an ontology of death; when the immunitary mechanisms of the twenty-first century reach the point of no return. In such an event, when the immunitary apparatus attacks *bios* by producing $z\bar{d}\bar{e}$, a space opens in which it becomes possible to posit *bios* not in opposition to $z\bar{d}\bar{e}$ but as its ultimate horizon. Thus the subject of *Bios* is life at the beginning of the twenty-first century, its fortunes inextricably joined to a ductile immunitary mechanism five hundred years or so in operation. Five hundred years is a long time, but the conditions, Esposito argues, may be right for a fundamental and long overdue rearticulation or reinscription of *bios* in a still-to-be-completed political lexicon that is radically humanistic to the degree that there can be no $z\bar{d}\bar{e}$ that isn't already *bios*. One of the shorthands Esposito offers us in *Bios* for thinking the difference will be found in the juxtaposition between a "politics of mastery and the negation of life" and another future, affirmative politics of life.²⁷

Life as Bios

These are, it seems to me, the most significant elements of Esposito's genealogy and ontology of contemporary biopolitics. What I would like to do in the remaining pages is to suggest possible areas of contact between *Bios* and contemporary public culture in this country. First, Esposito's uncovering of the reciprocity between community and immunity captures brilliantly the stalemate that continues to characterize debates in this country and elsewhere about the choice between security and freedom. One need only recall the Patriot Act and the justification for its attacks on civil liberties in the name of "homeland security" to see where the disastrous effects of excessive immunization on a community will be registered: precisely in immunity's closing to community. Once we see immunity/community as a continuum we can understand the precise meaning of "the war on terror begins at home" as directed against the radical opening to social relations that are implicit in the gift and obligation of the *munus*, both globally and locally. We are living, Esposito suggests, in one of the most lethal immunitary mechanisms of the modern period, lethal both for global relations, which now are principally based on war or the concurrent repression sanctioned by security concerns. As I've noted repeatedly, recognizing the dangers of immunization for meaningful and productive relations between individual members and among communities doesn't in any way lead Esposito, however, to argue for a return to some privileged origin of community. Attempts to locate such an origin are doomed to a melancholic search for community that can never be met. At the same time, recognizing the futility of such a search creates an opportunity, thanks to the contemporary immunity crisis, to think again what the basis for community might be. What needs to take place, therefore, is thinking through a dialectic of how to singularize "we." Esposito's itinerary, which moves through immunities that fortify singular "we's" thanks to individuation, not only can make us more attentive to our encounters with others and the other, but also can help us to examine more deeply the kinds of motivations that undergird these kinds of encounters.

Obviously the opportunity for thinking anew the assumptions on which communities come together will have a profound impact on the kind of public culture we wish

27. *I wish to thank Miguel Vatter for the terminology. For a discussion of the difference between biopower and biopolitics, which seems to me implicit in the above distinction, see Lazzarato: "Foucault's work ought to be continued upon this fractured line between resistance and creation. Foucault's itinerary allows us to conceive the reversal of biopower into biopolitics, the 'art of governance' into the production and government of new forms of life. To establish a conceptual and political distinction between biopower and biopolitics is to move in step with Foucault's thinking."*

for ourselves. What kind of public culture, for instance, is capable of vitalizing all forms of life? Is there already implicit in the notion of public culture a private space that can have no truck with the kinds of retooled relations Esposito is describing? These kinds of questions are not easily asked in the current war on terror, a war founded precisely on excluding “terrorists” from the horizon of *bios*, that is, as forms-of-life (now enemy combatants) who do not merit any political qualification. Thus when President Bush speaks of terrorism as representing “a mortal danger to all humanity” or when he describes “tense borders” under assault, the implicit connection to an immunitary paradigm becomes obvious [“President Bush Discusses the War on Terror”]. It is because terrorism represents a war on humanity, a war against life itself, that borders must be defended and strengthened. Not simply geographic borders, but more significantly the borders of the kind of life that can and cannot be inscribed in *bios*. The result is once again the politicization of life and with it the demarcation of those lives outside *bios*. The effect of limiting *bios* to only those on one side of the border is not simply to mark, however, those who can be sacrificed as *homo sacer*, as Agamben would have it, but rather to attack with violence the *munus* immunity shares with community. Interestingly, in some of the same speeches I cited above, Bush also speaks of liberty as the vital catalyst for improving “the lives of all”; leaving aside just what he intends for liberty, clearly today liberty is disclosed ever more readily as an effect of the immunity modality, much as Esposito describes it in those pages dedicated to Locke.²⁸ In perhaps more obvious fashion than has occurred in recent memory, liberty is spectacularly reduced to the security of the subject; a subject who possesses liberty is the secure(d) citizen. Although Esposito doesn’t elaborate on the relation of the modern subject to the citizen—as the closing pages of *Bios* make clear, his research is moving necessarily toward a genealogy of “the person” through the impersonal—he does explicitly suggest that a semantics of the individual or the citizen has always functioned within an immunitary paradigm.²⁹ As tempting as it might be to read liberty as a vital multiplier of community in opposition to immunity, such a strategy is doomed to failure as well, given liberty’s historical failure to maintain any autonomy with regard to the protection of life.

If we read Esposito carefully, the first step to a public culture made vital by *communitas* begins with the recognition that the lives of “terrorists” can in no way be detached from a political qualification that is originary to life. Rather than merely agreeing to their exteriorization to *bios*, which appears as both an ethical and a philosophical failure of enormous magnitude, what we need to do is to understand and practice differently the unity of *bios* and politics in such a way that we no longer reinforce the politicization of life (which is precisely what the war on terror is intended to do), but instead create the conditions for what he calls a “vitalization of politics” [172]. No greater task confronts us today than imagining the form such a vitalized politics might take, as that is precisely the direction in which an originary and intense sense of *communitas* resides.

Certainly important steps have already been taken. The appearance of *Bios* itself is significant precisely for this reason, in its disclosure of how profoundly modern (and

28. “As Americans, we believe that people everywhere—everywhere—prefer freedom to slavery, and that liberty once chosen, improves the lives of all” [“President Bush Discusses the War on Terror”].

29. See also his *Terza persona: Politica della vita e filosofia dell’impersonale*. On this point see also Achille Mbembe’s discussion of the individual as opposed to the person in discussions of African societies: “Finally, in these societies the ‘person’ is seen as predominant over the ‘individual,’ considered (it is added) ‘a strictly Western creation.’ Instead of the individual, there are entities, captives of magical signs, amid an enchanted and mysterious universe in which the power of invocation and evocation replaces the power of production, and in which fantasy and caprice coexist not only with the possibility of disaster but with its reality” [4]. My thanks to Adam Sitze for pointing out the deep connections between Esposito and Mbembe.

postmodern) categories of political philosophy not only block the emergence of a vital politics, but continue in a sort of feedback loop to reinforce a centuries-old immunization paradigm whose function it is to immunize the community from just such a vital opening to (bio)politics. Change begins when our conceptual language gives up the Hobbesian ghost, with its body politic, constitution, and Leviathans, in favor of a different strand of political philosophy, declined in terms of flesh, individuation, and a life immanent to living.

* * *

All of the essays collected in this issue elaborate on Esposito's thought or develop perspectives indebted to it. Part One is dedicated to Esposito himself, with the first English translation of his writing. Taken from chapter 2 of *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, the selection includes the centerpiece of Esposito's recent philosophical interventions, namely, the articulation of "the paradigm of immunity" through the fundamental *dispositifs* of immunity: sovereignty, property, and liberty. Next is an interview with Esposito conducted in 2005 in which he succinctly lays out both a topography of immunity as well as summarizes his current thinking on biopolitics. In Part Two are grouped the more "philosophical" engagements with Esposito's thought. It opens with Massimo Donà's suggestive reading of negativity in *Immunitas*. Here Donà, drawing upon the notions of encroachment and risk, uncovers in immunity another form of negation, in which the excluding and substituting features of traditional negation give way to affirmation. Rossella Bonita-Oliva takes up a different perspective in her mapping of Esposito's biopolitical itinerary across *Communitas*, *Immunitas*, and *Bios*. Vigorously engaging with the notion of flesh as Esposito appropriates it from Merleau-Ponty, she argues against a "new absolutization" that reduces the complementarity between form and life to a spatial dimension. Part Two concludes with Laurent Dubreuil's robust rejoinder to Esposito and Agamben's deployment of the Greek terms for life, *zōē* and *bios*. Focusing in particular on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Dubreuil argues against a "mystical" recourse to origin, be it *zōē* for Agamben or *bios* for Esposito, arguing instead for a notion of life that exceeds the biopower that engages it. Part Three converges around the political stakes of thinking *bios* for contemporary experience. It opens with Giorgio Giorgi and Karen Pinkus's discussion of neoliberalism and the defense of borders in the case of the *piquetero* movement that originated in Argentina during the 1990s as well as the emergence of the CPT—Temporary Centers of Permanence—in Italy during the last ten years. They show to what extent the fracture brought on by neoliberalism takes place at the level of the biopolitical. Part Three concludes with Laura Bazzicalupo's analysis of the ambivalences of biopolitics. Through a reading of current biopolitical practices in biotechnology and globalization, Bazzicalupo demonstrates how "the pervasiveness of the biological in the realm of the political" moves to include the democratizing and socializing processes of politics.

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