

Book Review

The Other Side of Life

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Why this current frenzy about theorizing “life”? It seems that “theory” (or, as some might prefer, philosophy, or simply “thinking” in the humanities and in parts of the social sciences and the (new) sciences – precisely the place of intersection at which the University of Minnesota series *Posthumanities*, directed by Cary Wolfe, locates itself) has raised the stakes, so to speak, by moving from language and culture as main battlegrounds (“language wars”, “culture wars”) to science (“science wars”) and now to “life” (“life wars”?). Where life is at stake, death is threatening: the death of the “humanities”, the death of “humanism”, the death of the “human”. To be fair, humanism and a certain set of values about what it might mean to be human have always been one of the main targets of theory, ever since the 1960s. Placed within this larger context the current focus on life as a discursive object can seem more like a “hype”. It is no secret that UK and US academia in particular are subject to powerful regimes of theory “fashion”. It is quite striking how everybody seems to be reading the same “key” texts, or how often the same references reappear and how the strategic usages seem to converge. One of the recent focal points in the turn to life (and death) is clearly Agamben and his reinterpretation of Foucault’s biopower, biopolitics in terms of a “thanatopolitics”.

After this rather skeptical introduction, let me immediately backtrack and say that Timothy Campbell’s *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Foucault*, positively stands out from the current bio-thanto-politics debate. In fact, Campbell is refreshingly critical of the thanatopolitical drift at work in anything biopolitical. Instead, his declared aim is to help return us to an “affirmative biopolitics”, and he attempts to achieve this by tackling the analysis of the role of “*technē*” (or “the technological”) in biopolitical thought.

The book starts with a set of powerful questions: “is there something about the nature of biopolitical thought today that makes it impossible to deploy affirmatively? Does biopolitical thought do the dirty, intellectual work of neoliberalism, offering little opposition to local threats, while focusing exclusively on matters of life and death at the level of species? What is it about *technē* that calls forth thanatos in a context of life?” (pp. vii, viii). At stake is thus, on the one hand, an analysis of the potential for resistance within contemporary biopolitical thinking to current global techno-thanatopolitical developments. On the other hand, Campbell is re-reading the main modern sources and protagonists of contemporary biopolitical thinking – Heidegger, Foucault, Agamben, Esposito and

Sloterdijk – in terms of their respective positioning vis-à-vis technology and technological determinism.

The volume is divided into four long chapters, three of which are analytical in tone, while the last one is programmatic. Campbell's main starting point in his analysis of the reason why technology might cause biopolitics to drift into thanatopolitics is Heidegger's differentiation between "proper" and "improper writing" and the loss of "authenticity" that causes. In chapter one, Campbell therefore returns to Heidegger and provides a close reading of "The Question Concerning Technology". Technology is that which "enframes" modern man (and, even more so, contemporary (post)humans) and produces the forgetting of and withdrawal from (authentic) Being. Heidegger's example is the typewriter, which instrumentalizes the human hand: in other words, that which is most essentially human, and hence it turns "proper" (or organic) writing into inauthentic or "improper" writing. According to Campbell's argument, this model of proper/authentic and improper/inauthentic or "expropriated" becomes the main binary opposition that informs all biopolitical thinking and is both the reason and the explanation why biopolitics almost inevitably turns into thanatopolitics. Technology is seen as that which provokes the forgetting of Being while at the same time it "reveals", exposes and challenges the essence of the human. It is the supposed "inhumanity" of this technological challenge that produces the focus on death in modern biopolitics in the forms of "danger" and "risk". The opposition between proper and improper writing (or the use of technology in general), accordingly, maps onto a division between "proper" and "improper life" in the sense of authentic humanity *versus* dehumanized, or mere "animal-being", which of course opens the route taken by twentieth-century totalitarianism (Nazism and Communism), and which, ideologically speaking at least, continues to shape contemporary biopolitical thinking under the conditions of neoliberal globalization. In one of the central paragraphs Campbell summarizes the role Heidegger's bio-thanato-logical thinking continues to play:

...the Heideggerian ontology of Being presupposes the lesser form of the human, in a division that today, thanks to Agamben, we refer to as *zoē* and *bíos*. If today the thanatopolitical seems to dominate contemporary perspectives on biopolitics as well as our understanding of neoliberalism and globalization, it is because of this deep ambiguity concerning man and technology and the dehumanizing effects the latter has for man (whether we locate it, as Agamben does, in some transhistorical past or, as in Esposito's case, as emerging with the dawn of modern immunization in Hobbes). (p. 28)

Campbell's main achievement is to have drawn together the various aspects of Heidegger's thinking on technology, its separating role from Being and its dehumanizing effect, and to have spelled out its influence on and role within current biopolitical thinking. Campbell provides this analysis and critical commentary in an absolutely clear, authoritative and accessible form – always aware of the various powerful critiques that Heidegger's thinking has undergone, with regard to the problematic notion of "authenticity", "anthropocentrism" and "technological determinism" that underlie it. Despite these deeply problematic political and ethical aspects in Heidegger's thinking on technology, as Campbell shows, Heidegger's distinction between "proper" and "improper" forms of writing or/on life informs all contemporary attempts to think biopolitics.

In chapter two, Campbell provides a careful and critical reading of Agamben and Esposito – two of the main followers of the Heideggerian distinction between the proper and improper in thinking the relationship between biopolitics and technology. Campbell returns to Agamben's highly influential

use of *bíos* and *zoē* that underlies the contemporary shift from bio- to thanatopolitics. In Agamben's model, *bíos* is reserved for the "proper" social life of the individual human being, while *zoē* is the "improper" dehumanized, animalized and depoliticized form of "bare life", which Agamben sees at work in the generalized trend towards the "*homo sacer*" (the silent, desubjectified, singular human life "at the disposal" or mercy of bio/thanatopolitics, across the ages, but increasingly so, today). What characterizes the proliferation of bare and exposed forms of life under the neoliberal, globalized, contemporary condition is the accumulation of "*dispositifs*" (apparatuses, devices, stratagems, mechanisms...). Originally a Foucauldian term used to explain how modern society uses political "mechanisms" in response to perceived emergencies (most famously, the "panopticon" as a surveillance *dispositif*), Campbell shows how in Agamben, Esposito and Sloterdijk (and by implication in all contemporary approaches to biopolitics) something like the *dispositif* appears as the main (technological) force which sends biopolitics onto the slippery slope towards the disposal over life, desubjectification, depoliticization and, hence, thanatopolitics.

At this point, Campbell attempts to draw a crucial distinction between the use Agamben makes of the *dispositif* as a clearly thanatological device, and the role it plays in Esposito, who follows Deleuze (and also the "later" Foucault), and for whom there is also an enabling (maybe even a life-affirming) aspect within the apparatus. This is connected to the ambiguity of the process of subjectification that every *dispositif* necessarily carries. Being a subject is a prerequisite for agency, but being subjected is also being at the receiving end of (bio)power. In the ambiguity of subjective agency are thus forces and "lines of flight" at work which prevent any *dispositif* from being completely determined in terms of subjectification or desubjectification. In Esposito, therefore, according to Campbell, there is a question of "affirming" the *dispositif*, and a politics of its "impersonal" power, which Esposito wishes to harness for a renewal of community.

However, it is not so much a question of overcoming the opposition between proper and improper life but of deconstructing or repositioning the relationship between biology/life and politics, as Campbell explains. This is where he sets his hopes on some aspects in Peter Sloterdijk's commentary on the positive potential of bioengineering. In chapter three, he focuses on Sloterdijk's take on the bio-thanato-political. Again, Campbell's merit lies in capturing a very diverse and ambitious philosophical work by arguably one of the most wide-ranging, provocative and "dangerous" thinkers, in one clear and accessible chapter. Also highly original and crucial is Campbell's attempt to place Sloterdijk alongside Heidegger and Agamben as a thinker on technology and thanatopolitics. Sloterdijk reads globalization as an ongoing process of interiorization and immunization – both are anthropotechnics of humanization which create habitable spaces for humans, but which, at the same time, have adverse "(auto)immunitarian" effects. Humans, and in particular modern humans, use technology to create spaces (or protective "spheres") through which to explore by separation and "interiorisation". Sloterdijk uses the analogy of the astronaut and the space suit:

Modernity essentially consists of the struggle to create these metaphorical space suits, immunitary regimes, he will call them, that will protect Europeans from dangerous and life-threatening contact with the outside... (p. 88)

Where the proper and improper distinction reoccurs in Sloterdijk's writing is in the loss of authentic community in modern societies. The (auto)immunitarian drift within human history is being exploited by neoliberal globalization and governmentality to insulate the individual within their respective little spheres through the use of the *dispositifs* designed to create security and protection against

terrorism. For Sloterdijk there is a dangerous link between contemporary biopolitics and the discourse on terrorist threats, security and immunity, which leads to thanatopolitical forms of governmentality. Now, according to Campbell, and this is where he might have read Sloterdijk somewhat too optimistically, Sloterdijk places his bets in a rather desperate attempt on biotechnology and bioengineering as a possibilities for (at least some) humans to wrest biopolitics back from the claws of thanatology, by “administering [their] own zoological features”, or by “administer[ing their] own life through death” (p. 117).

Having made his case on the role of technology for thanatopolitics, Campbell, in the concluding chapter, returns us to Foucault and attempts a rereading of the “final” Foucault in terms of an “affirmative” biopolitics to be developed out of the “care for the self” aspect, which Campbell wants us to read not predominantly in ethical but instead in life-political terms. He thus returns to the main underlying question of the volume: “Is the drift toward *thanatos* the only possibility for contemporary forms of technologized existence?” (p. 119). The need for a positive or affirmative biopolitics given the exponential growth of neoliberal *dispositifs* aimed at controlling and securing populations, on the one hand, and promoting marketized forms of exchange to more and more generalized areas of life, on the other hand, Campbell rightly asks: “Is securing populations the only possibility for biopolitics in a technologized milieu, its increasing inscription as only biopower, with only a toxic mix of *dispositifs* and media to look forward to?” (p. 126). Alternatively, Campbell proposes to imagine another form of *technē* for *bíos* by appealing to the notions of attention and play. This is where the volume changes tone and becomes speculative and programmatic in outline. It emphasizes the aesthetic dimension of Foucauldian biopower and biopolitics as a starting point for a care for the self that would simply remove the negative and destructive inscription of *technē*, by “attending” to the object and to the “immanence” of life forms. The way to achieve this ethico-political and affirmative attention to life as immanence (a clear echo of Deleuze and the renewal of the vitalist tradition) is, according to Campbell a metaphysics of “play” (which is of course the point at which Campbell invokes the “early” Derrida of “Structure, Sign and Play”) with its emphasis on creativity. He envisages forms of life that are not from the start captured by or for a self, and which, on a rather hopeful note, would “[help] us create a breach between care and mastery, between a care for the self felt first in terms of forms of *bíos* and known only after in terms of mastery” (p. 156).

This utopian plea certainly is the most problematic part of Campbell’s otherwise very powerful volume. For a start, it seems to forget, or at least to downplay the other side of the current critique of thanatopolitics, which would be located in what might be called “materialist feminist” work by authors like Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad or Vicki Kirby, who through a critical rereading of Deleuze and the vitalist tradition also argue for a more affirmative and inclusive notion of life, but by insisting on the experience of a materialist notion of difference. It is of course always easy and slightly unfair to criticize an author for what he or she hasn’t done, instead of keeping to an analysis of what one could call the “immanence” of the project at hand, except maybe for those cases where this immanence itself might cause a problem. Campbell makes very selective use of Derrida (and Sloterdijk). It might have been worth looking at the Derrida who, more recently, has emerged out of the intense “life-long conversation” with Hélène Cixous, especially in his last texts, and in *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...* (2006) in particular. Here Derrida tries to engage with precisely this feminist materialist, life-affirming tradition, without, however, “being on its side”, but, at the same time, without arguing any longer entirely from the thanatological side of (patriarchal, Western) metaphysics (or carno-phallo-logo-thanato...-centrism (cf. Derrida, 1991)), or the “side of death”. In fact, he describes the very impossibility of being able to “choose” sides in this context. A certain

awareness of the problematic (or the aporia) of this necessity *and* impossibility at work in the choice “for life” from the side of death (which, as Derrida explains, is of course not a side you can *be* on) would have shown not only the continued indebtedness of Agamben, Esposito, Sloterdijk and the whole bio-thanato-political tradition of thinking to Heidegger’s problematic notion of propriety and impropriety in technological humanity; but it would also have addressed the male-centredness of this entire tradition, including what might be called its “techno-phallo-centrism”. This is, for example, one of the reasons why a critical approach to the broad issue of posthumanist subjectivity might need to check the current tendency to foreground the importance of technology in discussions of human/social evolution. Rather, a heuristic space might be created from which to start questioning the rampant technological determinism that persists in contemporary and arguably “postanthropocentric” perspectives on bio-thanato-politics: even in those approaches where attempts are being made to move towards an affirmative notion of life that remains clear-minded about what might be more properly vital, as for example in Campbell’s volume.

In short, the merit of Campbell’s analysis of the theoretical bio-thanato-political framework is very powerful, and this review cannot but be appreciative of that. Read from a standpoint looking to explore posthumanist subjectivity in the wake of all the improprieties chronicled and analysed by Campbell, however, its project remains incomplete because, in the current “life wars”, it only tells one side of the story. But then again perhaps ultimately the lesson to draw – linking it also with the point made by Derrida on the impossibility of choosing between life and death – is that it has also become impossible to affirm the proper over the improper. And in that, somehow, lies the challenge of posthumanist subjectivity.

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