

# The antinomical duality of biopolitical discourse in Agamben, Esposito and Arendt

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## The antinomical duality of biopolitical discourse in Agamben, Esposito and Arendt

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SCOTT MASON, MAY 12 2011

### Avoiding 'biopolitical catastrophe'

*And as the same thing there exists in us living and dead and the walking and the sleeping and the young and the old: for these things having changed round are those, and those having changed round are these*  
**Heraclitus[1]**

*'What nature does blindly, slowly and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly. As it lies within his power, so it becomes his duty to work in that direction'*  
**Sir Francis Galton[2]**

In the final chapter of the *History of Sexuality* vol. 1 Michel Foucault observes how in political modernity, the 'formidable power of death... now presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life... the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individuals continued existence' [3]. This binary and antinomical relationship between life and death, would be central to the development of the concept of 'biopolitics', first elaborated in the now famous lecture series *Society Must Be Defended* performed at the Collège de France (1975-76), and later refined in the *Birth of Biopolitics* (1978-79). Here Foucault provides a genealogy of the modern liberal state through a detailed analysis of the governmental technologies and political rationalities which from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century take biological or species life as their referent object; seeking to regulate the contingent and complex biological processes inherent in such systems, through the deployment of administrative mechanisms and tactics, which achieved certain finalities. Thus for Foucault, biopolitics involves the study of life processes including reproduction and birth-death ratios, as well as a number of political problems related with the interactions of man-as-species. Biopolitics seeks to understand and regulate these processes and interactions to ensure the affluence and prosperity of the population. As such with the development of biopolitics in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Foucault argues that the nature of sovereign power was radically transformed, from the Hobbesian theory of the sovereign right to kill, to the biopolitical notion that the sovereign has a right to protect the population, or 'make life live'. Crucially however the regulatory function of biopower, requires the creation of a biological metric against which forms of life are judged to be either worthy or unworthy of life itself. The introduction of normative distinctions between different forms of life, creates caesuras within the biological domain addressed by biopower, and makes the logic 'if you want to live the other must die' [4] compatible with biopolitics. Thus for Foucault with the application of biopower, a relationship is forged between the power of life, and power over life, that is between an affirmative biopolitics and a genocidal thanopolitics. As Foucault himself writes, 'wars are no longer

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waged in the name of a sovereign who needs to be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of necessity: massacres have become vital' [5].

In recent years the concept of biopower has become central to the study of the social and life sciences; with numerous interdisciplinary research networks established to investigate the reality of biopower, in relation to subjects as diverse as stem cell research, biotechnologies, and the War on Terror. Foremost amongst the contemporary theorist who have sought to adopt and develop Foucault's concept, is the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Although credited by many with renewing the field of biopolitical research, Agamben declines biopolitics negatively associating it with the violence of sovereign exception and 'bare life'. Indeed in the closing passages of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben claims that mankind is approaching an 'unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe' [6], wherein the juridico-political system of governance entrusted with the protection of the population 'transforms itself into a killing machine' [7]. Thus like Foucault before him, here Agamben clearly identifies the genocidal potential inherent in the logic and rationalities of biopower, claiming that, 'in every modern state, a point exists which defines the moment when the decision of life is transformed into the decision on death, and when biopolitics is thus inverted and becomes thanatopolitics' [8]. As such modern biopolitical discourse is today confronted with the fundamental dilemma of how to apply biopower positively without it being transformed into a politics of death. Considering the current centrality of life and biological processes to all forms of political power and governance, this paradox may very well represent the foremost aporia of contemporary political thought.

In the following, I will present the response of three theorists, Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito and Hannah Arendt, to the thanatopolitical potential of biopower. Although each thinker may articulate the precise nature of this duality differently – Agamben conceptualises it in terms of sovereign exception, Esposito investigates the functioning of thanatopolitical Nazi dispositifs, and Arendt outlines her analysis in relation to totalitarianism – all clearly identify the existence of mortality within the logic of the politics of life. Thus my intention here is not to conflate or superimpose the analysis of these three related but nevertheless distinct theorist, but rather structure the key points of intersection and departure in their examinations of the relationship between life and death in politics, as well as evaluate and compare their respective responses to the antinomical duality in biopolitical discourse.

To begin with I will present an in depth examination of Giorgio Agamben's highly influential analysis of sovereign abandonment, exclusion and power, as well as his negative interpretation of the role of biopolitics. This exegesis of Agamben's work will seek not only to underline his apocalyptic vision of contemporary politics, but also to explain his rejection of biological life as a means of resistance toward sovereign violence. Using Agamben as a point of departure I will then proceed to evaluate the responses to the thanatopolitical declension of biopower provided by Esposito, Agamben and Arendt respectively. Beginning with Esposito I will provide a detailed examination of *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. In which Esposito investigates the radical transformation of politics in modernity, through the application of his own paradigm of immunization. In particular I will demonstrate how Esposito attempts to develop an affirmative understanding of biopolitics by deconstructing what he describes as the thanatopolitical Nazi dispositifs. Following this examination of Esposito, I will evaluate Agamben's own response to the functional duality of biopolitics, in which he advocates the implementation of a revolutionary form of messianism, which according to Agamben will disconnect life from the aporetic violence of sovereign exception. Finally I shall propose the adoption of Arendt's concept of natality as a principle which effectively synthesises the messianic with biopolitics; allowing us to reconnect biological life with freedom and politics, whilst also overcoming the violent duality of biopolitics, and thereby avoiding 'biopolitical catastrophe'.

## Agamben, Bare life and the State of Exception

*'The state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics' [9]*

**Giorgio Agamben**

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Over the past 20 years Giorgio Agamben has emerged as one of the most highly influential and respected figures across a broad range of disciplines, including aesthetics, philosophy, and ethics. In particular Agamben's critical investigations into sovereignty, law, and the biopolitical production of bare life, as outlined initially in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) and then later in the *State of Exception* (2005) have generated much critical debate as well as a renewed interest in the field of biopolitics. In both text's Agamben attempts to build upon Foucault's earlier work on biopower to provide a radical reinterpretation of the modern political condition as one of sovereign abandonment and exclusion. However crucially in contrast to Foucault's understanding of biopower as the 'threshold of modernity', Agamben claims that the organisation of mechanisms of power and their correlative political strategies, around the problem of species life are, 'at least as old as the sovereign exception' [10] itself. As such Agamben seeks to de-emphasise Foucault's analysis of the emergence of biopolitics in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century as a historic rupture with sovereign power, and instead maintains that the operation of biopower is in fact fundamentally coexistent with that of sovereignty. In his examination of this relationship Agamben is able to draw simultaneously on theorist as diverse as Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin and Aristotle to provide a unique understanding of the role of sovereignty in an age of biopower. Central to Agamben's thesis is the concept of sovereign exception which he claims constitutes the original relation of Western politics. Furthermore Agamben insists life captured within this exception is 'bare life' that is life irreparably exposed to death at the hands of sovereignty; and so is able to decline biopolitics negatively, by anchoring it to the violence and brutality of the state of exception. In the following I will attempt to reconstruct the central themes of Agamben's thesis on biopolitics and the state of exception, assessing the role of biopolitics in Agamben work, and examining why Agamben rejects the body as a site of a productive politics. Finally I will briefly outline some of the criticism directed towards Agamben's negative interpretation of biopolitics.

Agamben begins his investigation into modern biopolitics with an examination of what he conceives to be a fundamental paradox at the centre of the sovereignty, whereby the sovereign exist simultaneously inside and outside the juridical order. For Agamben this situation is demonstrated clearly by the concept of sovereign exception as outlined by German political theorist Carl Schmitt in his seminal work *Political Theology*. Adopting Schmitt's central thesis that the 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception' [11], Agamben demonstrates that through the institution of sovereign exception and the suspension of traditional rule of law, the sovereign is able to transcend traditional juridical boundaries; existing inside the law, whilst paradoxically also remaining outside. As this decision on exception eludes traditional legal codification, it must be undertaken by the sovereign; who alone remains beyond normal juridical rule. As Schmitt comments 'the exception is that which cannot be subsumed; it defies general codification, but it simultaneously reveals a specific juristic element – the decision in absolute purity... Therein resides in the essence of the state's sovereignty.. which must be juristically defined... as the monopoly to decide' [12]. Furthermore as the exception exists only when in relation to the norm, the sovereign decision on exception must also necessarily be a decision on the juridical norms themselves. As such the State of Exception represents what may be described as a 'threshold concept' in which the sovereign decision delineates the boundary between what is inside the juridical order and what is conversely beyond the protection and prosecution of the rule of law. In creating this boundary the sovereign is not only able to 'create and guarantee the situation that the law needs for its own validity' [13], thereby opening a space in which meaningful legal process is possible, but also affirm and consolidate the position of sovereignty itself as the fundamental condition of the Western political paradigm.

Importantly however, Agamben notes that although the exception may be defined by its exteriority to the rule of law, it is nevertheless able to maintain a relation to the law itself through its own exclusion. As Agamben himself insists, 'the rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it... the particular force of law consists in this capacity of law to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority' [14]. For Agamben this inclusive/exclusion mechanism implicit within the structure of exception, correlates directly with his conceptualisation of the subjects relation to the law within a state of exception; conceived as in a condition of 'abandonment'; a term appropriated by Agamben from Jean-Luc Nancy [15]. Thus whereas the state of exception is included within the purview of law through its very exclusion; the subject is not simply excluded from the law but rather held in relation to the law as a subject of exception, that is, given to the law in its own suspension. Furthermore Agamben claims this subject which finds itself caught within the sovereign ban is in fact life itself, as he insists 'life...[is] the element that in exception, finds itself in

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the most intimate relation with sovereignty' [16].

Following this observation Agamben elaborates on his understanding of the correlation between life and law within the state of exception through an in depth analysis of the dispute between Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem concerning the status of law in the writings of Franz Kafka. Adopting Scholem's understanding of the law as 'being in force without significance', Agamben argues that in contemporary politics the law has become purged of all positive content and suspended in its application, 'where the wealth of significance is gone and what appears reduced... to the zero point of its own content, still does not disappear' [17]. Under such circumstances the law finds itself 'not absent but unrealisable' [18], void of any meaning, or potency. Such an interpretation of the law brings Agamben to Benjamin's objection to Scholem, and therefore back to the issue of the continuity between life and law. Indeed Benjamin insists that an interpretation of the law as 'in force without significance' necessarily leads to an indistinguishability between life and law such that, law no longer maintains any transcendence over life but is wholly coincidental with it. Thus by endorsing both Scholem and Benjamin Agamben is able to claim that life within a state of exception and law in force without significance fall in to an zone of irreducible indistinction.

Crucially the form of life captured within the inclusive/exclusion of the sovereign ban is not a naturalised or biological life but rather, 'bare life' or life that is constantly exposed to the sovereigns right to death, as Agamben himself puts it 'not simple natural life, but life exposed to death (bare life or scared life) is the originary political element' [19]. Furthermore for Agamben the production of bare life constitutes the 'original activity of sovereign power' [20] itself, that is, sovereignty constitutes itself through the creation of a boundary between legitimate and illegitimate life, which Agamben locates within the Aristotelian distinction between political existence (*bios*) and unqualified natural life (*zoë*). As such bare life emerges as a politicised yet nevertheless excluded form of natural life (*zoe*), caught within a state of sovereign abandonment yet simultaneously exposed to the sovereigns power over death. Such recourse to this Aristotlean distinction, reveals an important disjunction between Foucault's analysis of the emergence of biopolitics in the nineteenth century, and Agamben's own insistence that 'biopolitics is at least as old as the exception' [21]. Thus in contrast to Foucault, Agamben locates the origin of biopolitics not at the threshold of modernity, but rather at the origin of sovereignty itself, and in particular in the archaic Roman figure of *homo sacer*, whom Agamben describes as 'life that cannot be sacrificed yet maybe killed' [22]. Thus *homo sacer* represents the human manifestation of bare life, a life which delineates the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate life, which is caught irremediably within the sovereign ban, and which is exposed constantly to death.

Such an understanding of the ontological foundations of biopower, has a number of consequences for Agamben's interpretation contemporary biopolitical regimes. Firstly as already mentioned such an analysis signals a significant divergence from Foucault's claim that the emergence biopolitics represented the 'threshold of modernity', as well as a decisive break with juridical forms of sovereignty. Thus whereas Foucault suggest that biopower in many respects succeeds and supplants juridical forms of power, Agamben insists that biopower and sovereignty are in fact co-productive. As such the biopolitical regimes operative within political modernity, are not distinguished by their insertion of life into the realm of political discourse, but rather by a blurring of the simple topographical distinction between inside and outside, through an even increasing reference to exception as the norm, as Agamben himself comments:

*'together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoë, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction' [23].*

As such the reduction of life to bare life within the state of exception, now becomes the norm, as all subjects now exist in a condition of potential abandonment. As Agamben argues, 'the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*' [24].

In demonstrating this intimate link between sovereign rule and biopolitical exception, Agamben posits the camp, as 'the hidden matrix of modernity' [25], or the space within which biopolitical exception is given a permanent and concrete physical basis. As Agamben himself comments, with the invention of the camp, 'the state of exception

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which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger is now given a permanent spatial arrangement which nevertheless remains outside the normal order' [26]. Thus it is precisely within the boundaries of the camp that the topographical distinctions between fact and law, inside and outside break down, and in which 'power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation' [27]. Here Agamben naturally invokes the spectre of the Nazi concentration camps; however his analysis of the role of the camp within political modernity also touches upon more contemporary concerns with exceptional sovereign violence. In particular the detention camp at Guantanamo bay which can be interpreted as a paradigmatic example of contemporary exceptionalism, whereby even the camps geographical location places it beyond the jurisdiction of US law. As such the official legal status of the detainees remains highly ambiguous, stripped of all citizenry rights, yet nevertheless exposed constantly to sovereign power. Furthermore as Judith Butler alludes to within the War on Terror the conditions of exception become evermore generalise such that. 'the state within its executive function, now extends the conditions of national emergency so that the state will now have recourse to extra-legal detention and suspension of established law, both domestic and international for the foreseeable future' [28]. Thus with the creation of abject spaces such as Guantanamo, the jurisdiction of sovereignty is expanded, and the border delocalised; it is within these spaces that the brutal and violent logic of sovereign power is allowed to reach its inevitable conclusion.

Ultimately for Agamben the birth of the camp represents not just the confluence of exception and rule, but also the intensification of a biopolitical logic which would in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, achieve its most complete realisation, in the thanatopolitical regime of Nazi Germany. Thus for Agamben political modernity has failed in its attempt to reconcile zoe and bios through the politicalisation of biological life, and therefore eradicate the production of bare life. As Catherine Mills commented, 'while modern politics is increasingly played out on the level of biological life, in its attempt to discover the bios of zoe it nevertheless produces bare life as the excrescence of its failure, thereby preventing the overcoming of the sovereign exception and the violence that conditions bare life' [29]. Consequently Agamben concludes that any attempt to negate the thanatopolitical potential of biopolitical regimes from within the theoretical framework of zoe and bios, will be undermined by the aporetic violence of exception. Furthermore such projects will necessarily reproduce this aporia, leading inevitably to a congruence between liberal democracy, and totalitarianism. That is to say, in attempting to escape the capture of life within the sovereign ban through recourse to a naturalised or biological life, life is in affect recaptured through the politicisation of that natural form of life. Thus Agamben rejects the body as a site of resistance to biopower, arguing that 'the body is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it... seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power.' [30].

Agamben's interpretation of the state of exception as an aporia that characterises western politics, coupled with his overwhelmingly negative analysis of biopolitics, have undoubtedly had a considerable impact upon contemporary political theory. However Agamben's chronic lack of conceptual differentiation, along with his reification of the state of exception, and a tendency towards dramatisation over objective evaluation, has led to much criticism from theorist from a wide range of disciplines. Leaving aside concerns over Agamben's fragmentary and often impenetrable style, here I would like to briefly highlight some of the major criticisms of Agamben's wholly negative conception of biopolitics as well as his understanding of the state of exception. Firstly though Agamben's concept of the borderline or threshold allows him to distinguish between bare life, and political existence, the concept of a border does not allow for an analysis of the process of evaluation, that is the emphasis on a fixed threshold does not account for life's differentiation, or the process of normalisation, but rather it reduces the analysis to a sovereign decision between inclusion or exclusion, life and death. For Foucault the dis-juncture between the biopolitical desire to 'make life live', and the fundamental sovereign right to kill, could only be reconciled through the implementation of racism as a metric of biopolitics, 'creat[ing] a caesuras within the biopolitical continuum addressed by biopower', and making the relationship, 'if you want to live, the other must die' [31], compatible with biopolitics. Thus as Foucault argues, 'Racism justifies the death-function in the economy of biopower by appealing to the principle that the death of others makes one biologically stronger insofar as one is a member of a race or a population, insofar as one is an element in a unitary plurality' [32]. By contrast however Agamben describes no mechanism through which the hierarchisation or evaluation of life is possible, instead the binary relationships between zoe and bios, bare life and political existence, exception and rule are produced and dominated by the sovereign alone.

Related to this point is Agamben's claim to the existence of a structural continuity between sovereignty and

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biopolitics originating in antiquity, which became intensified in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Again this claim contradicts Foucault's discontinuist approach which argues that biopolitics to a large extent succeeds sovereignty as the fundamental logic of governance in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. As such, Foucault suggests that we must move beyond an analysis of power relations in the juridico-discursive terms of sovereignty, to investigate 'infinitesimal mechanisms of power which operate at the micro-level, as Foucault himself insisted, 'what we need however is a political philosophy that isn't erected around the problem of sovereignty... We need to cut off the King's head: in political theory that has still to be done' [33]. Furthermore Foucault argues we must avoid the temptation to consider global actors such as states, as the central conductors of power, instead we must look at power on the extremities, and the local level where it 'transgresses the rules of right that organise and delineate it' [34]. For Foucault this method of analysis provides a 'sort of autonomous and non-centralized theoretical production' [35] which enables us to understand power not as a operating in a linear downward vector, but rather as something which circulates through networks, as Foucault puts it 'power must, I think, be analysed as something which circulates, or rather that functions only when it is part of a chain. It is never localised here or there, it is never in the hands of some, and it is never appropriated in the way that wealth or a commodity can be appropriated... Power is exercised through networks' [36]. In contrast to this sophisticated understanding of the operation of power in modern biopolitics, Agamben pursues an analysis of power grounded wholly within the categories of domination and repression derived from the very forms of juridico-discursive power, which Foucault had identified as insufficient for a (complete) analysis of modern biopolitics. Furthermore Agamben's approach relies heavily upon a limited state-centric approach to international relations, which fails to account for the dispersive and decentralised functions of power, which have displaced the role of the state.

The final objection to Agamben's work refers to his reification of the sovereign state, and of the duality between law and exception as an originary boundary, such that the contingent historico-political conditions necessary for the constitution of sovereign authority itself are marginalised or worst disregarded completely. Thus by projecting the state of exception as 'the great historico-transcendental destiny of the Occident' [37], Agamben ignores Foucault's analysis of the emergence of state sovereignty not as, the rational progression from a pre-modern anarchy, but rather as the residual and contingent outcome of violent conquest, and the victory of a particular history over a multiplicity of possible histories. As Andrew Neal comments, 'the modern sovereign nation-state has only ever been a historically-contingent idealisation of what political authority should look like. It is not a timeless principle, but the outcome of often violent historical and socio-political practices' [38]. As such Agamben provides no indication of how sovereignty itself come to be constituted, and instead relies upon reductive and essentialist claims about the nature of the sovereign state and the state of exception, as Timothy Campbell observes, Agamben's essentialist and dualistic approach results in a 'kind of flattening of the specificity of a modern biopolitics in favour of a metaphysical reading of the originary and infinite state of exception that has since its inception eroded the political foundations of social life' [39].

Ultimately Agamben's analysis of contemporary sovereignty produces a politics already declined negatively as biopolitics; his claim that sovereignty and biopower are fundamentally conducive means that the body is always already captured within the sovereign ban and therefore reduced to bare life. Although this analysis has many problems as briefly outlined above, Agamben does nevertheless demonstrate quite clearly how in contemporary politics biopower can become connected to its potential negation. Later I will analyse Agamben's response to this aporia of modern politics, in which he calls for an inauguration of a 'form of life' which overcomes the destructive distinction between *bios* and *zoe*. Firstly however I want to examine the response to Agamben posed by the emerging Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito, who claims that modern political categories of thought are now completely ineffectual when attempting to analyse the operation of biopower in political modernity. Thus I shall now briefly outline Esposito's analysis of biopower, before assessing how it enables us to conceive of an emancipatory politics not caught within the aporetic violence of the state of exception.

## **Esposito, Biopolitics and the Immunization Paradigm**

Until recently the work of Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito has remained untranslated, and so largely

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unknown to an anglophonic audience. With the publication of *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2008) however, Esposito's thought has been placed at the very epicentre of the contemporary debates on biopolitics and biopower. In it Esposito rejects Agamben's accentuation of the negative tonality of biopolitical phenomenon, which he anchors to the sovereign state of exception; in favour of a positive reading of biopolitics, which avoids the conflation of biopower with Nazi thanatopolitics, whilst also providing the possibility of a new emancipatory political philosophy of life. Central to Esposito's thesis is the paradigm of immunization, which indicates that the modern subject emerges not with the institution of sovereign power, but rather from an attempt to gain immunity from the expropriative effects of the community. According to Esposito this attempt to immunize the individual creates a sort of auto-immune reaction whereby the subject itself become reduced to species life, thereby becoming a object of biopower. In *Bios* Esposito attempts to demonstrate how and why the logic of immunization inevitably leads to the lethal paradox in which the politics of life is accompanied by its potential negation, but also how it is possible to identify and deconstruct the thanatopolitical dispositifs upon which the paradigm of immunity are founded, and therefore open a space for an anti-immunitary politics. In this way Esposito registers the thanatopolitical declension of biopolitics, inherent in the work of Agamben, but insists that; this duality should be understood through the optic of immunity rather than sovereignty, as Timothy Campbell comments, '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 a sense he folds the state of exception in the more global reading of modern immunity dispositifs' [40]. Furthermore Esposito claims this degeneration of politics of life into politics of death is not inevitable as Agamben might claim but can be halted through an inversion of the semantics and language of the thanatopolitical logic of Nazism. In this next section I will provide a brief summary and analysis of *Bios*, focusing in particular on Esposito's concept of immunity, its relation to Nazism and his concept of an affirmative biopolitics, before finally outlining some of the main criticisms of his work.

Over the past 30 years Roberto Esposito has attempted to demonstrate the limits of traditional categories of political thought for understanding politics, through an in depth analysis of the relationships between the individual, the community, and the concept of immunity. Central to this project lies Esposito's trilogy ;*Communitas: the Origin and Destiny of the Community* (1998) in which Esposito theorizes the relation between the individual and the community, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (2002) which describes the emergence of immunity as the central paradigm of political modernity, and finally *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, which links immunity to the concept of biopolitics. Each work builds progressively upon the last and as such to fully appreciate Esposito's interpretation of biopolitics, it is essential that I first briefly rehearse the relationship between community and immunity which Esposito outlines in his two earlier works.

Drawing upon the etymological roots of community in *munus*, which Esposito describes as the obligation to give oneself to others, Esposito argues that at the foundation of the community (*Communitas*) lies a reciprocity of gift giving, where the obligation of return precludes the giving of a gift to oneself, and so directly undermines the capacity of an individual to identify himself other than in relation to the community. As Timothy Campbell comments, 'this debt or obligation of gift giving operates as a kind of originary defect for those belonging to a community. The defect revolves around the percious effects of reciprocal donation on individual identity' [41], as such *munus* represents a grave threat to the individual, as the community will continually demand more from its members.

In response to this threat Esposito identifies the concept of immunity- itself reread through reference to its etymological origin – as a mechanism through which the individual protects himself against the excesses of communal living, as Esposito insists, 'immunity implies an exemption from or the derogation of such a condition of gift giving. He is immune who is safe from obligation or dangers that concern everyone else from the moment that giving something in and of itself implies a diminishment of one's own goods and in the ultimate analysis also oneself' [42]. As such immunity allows for the reinstitution of the boundary between the communal and the private, such that the individual can maintain an identity separate to that of the community, as Esposito comments 'if *communitas* is that relation, which in binding its members to an obligation of reciprocal donation, jeopardizes individual identity, *immunitas* is the condition of dispensation from such an obligation and therefore defence against the expropriative features of *communitas*' [43]. Here however, the dialectical movement implicit in the concept of *immunitas* becomes clear; in attempting to protect the life of the individual from the contagion of the common, the community

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consequently puts itself at risk by turning in upon itself, and internalizing its own negation. As Esposito observes, 'to survive, the community every community is forced to introject the negativity of its own opposite, even if that opposite remains precisely a lacking and contrastive mode of the being of the community itself' [44]. In this way *Immunitas* both negates and presupposes the communal *munus*, in such a way that the community folds in upon itself, nullifying the logic of gift giving whilst also inaugurating an new logic of social existence. As such *Immunitas* generates a kind of auto-immune reaction, whereby the individual body becomes so isolated from the communal that it is reduced to mere species existence; it is this auto-immune mechanism that Esposito will investigate as the basis for his reading of modern biopolitics.

In *Bios* Esposito re-contextualises the concepts of *communitas* and *immunitas* developed in his earlier work to provide an analysis of why in political modernity, a politics erected exclusively around the principle of the absolute value of the individual human life, can transmute into the genocidal politics which has characterised the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Esposito begins by identifying what he considers to be the missing nodes in Foucault's argumentation on biopolitics. For Esposito, Foucault displays a certain ambivalence, in respect to biopolitics; forever mediating between interpretations of biopolitics as 'power of life' and power over life'. Thus Foucault finds himself trapped between two hermeneutic poles, in which 'the category of biopolitics folds in upon itself without disclosing the solution to its own enigma' [45]. According to Esposito this hermeneutic uncertainty is symptomatic of Foucault's failure to formulate a coherent relationship between biopower and modernity; that is how biopower relates temporally to sovereignty and the modern. To resolve this 'insufficiency' Esposito submits the paradigm of immunization as a category inextricable linked with the emergence of the modern, to the extent that, 'one might come to affirm that it wasn't modernity that raised the question of [immunity], but that [immunity] is itself raised in modernity's being' [46]. Thus modernity comes in to being, only when members of the communitarian *munus*, willingly surrender their natural rights to a sovereign power, as a method by which they immunize themselves against the violence implicit in communal life. The importance of Hobbes as a philosophical point of departure for the modern immunitary paradigm, here is apparent, however Esposito is quick to reject the traditional political categories of thought employed by Hobbes and his successors as 'nothing other than the linguistic and conceptual modalities by which the the immunitary question of how to safeguard negatively individual and collective life is translated into philosophical/juridical terms' [47]; choosing instead to privilege his own paradigm of immunity. In other words Esposito argues that the classic modern political categories should not be interpreted in their 'absoluteness' that is what they claim to be, but rather as institutional forms adopted by the immunitary logic to protect life from its own collective organisation. In this way concepts of sovereignty, liberty and property act simply as forms of intercession between life and politics, such that they remain distinct. For Esposito this mediation of politics and life defined negatively through the categories of sovereignty, liberty and property, leads to the alienation of life from the community, and so ends up risking life more than before. As Karen Pinkus describes, 'the paroxysmal paradox of this dispositif is that, in trying to preserve life, immunity may eliminate life itself' [48]. According to Esposito modern biopolitics emerges as an auto-immune reaction to this paradox, or put another way as an attempt to immunize the individual against the the immunitary strategies of liberal modernity. Thus as we enter into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century this form of mediation begins to breakdown as politics starts to assume an intrinsically biological characterisation, here then life and politics, 'rather than being superimposed or juxtaposed in an external form that subjects one to the domination of the other, in the immunity paradigm, *bios* and *nomos*, life and politics, emerge as the two constituent elements of a single, indivisible whole that assumes meaning from their interrelation' [49]. In contrast to Agamben therefore, Esposito rejects the utility sovereignty, as an interpretative tool capable of analysing contemporary biopolitics. Instead opting to fold sovereign power into a more universal reading of immunity, as Timothy Campbell observes, 'for Esposito sovereignty... doesn't transcend biopolitics but rather is immanent to the working of the immunity mechanism that he sees driving all forms of modern (bio)politics' [50]. For Esposito the unification of life and politics, realised through the complete development of the immunitary lexicon allows us to 'find an internal articulation, a semantic juncture capable of organising the two principle declinations of the biopolitical paradigm – one affirmative and productive and the other negative and lethal – into a coherent causal relation' [51]. Following his investigation into immunity's relationship with modernity and the emergence of biopolitics, Esposito will proceed to analyse each declension of biopower in turn, demonstrating first how biopolitics degenerates into thanatopolitics, via the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, before showing how through the deconstruction of Nazi dispositifs an affirmative and non-immunitary biopolitics is possible.

For Esposito, the missing theoretical manoeuvre necessary for the transition between the first and second phases of



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the immunitary paradigm – that is between sovereign mediation and the uninhibited congruence of life and politics – can be found in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose theorisation of the will to power enables us to conceive of power as operating exclusively within the field of life, as well as life as existing immanent to relations of power. In this way Nietzsche can be regarded as an ‘extraordinary seismograph of the exhaustion of modern political categories when mediating between politics and life’ [52], demonstrating how contrary to the juridical framework of political thought, ‘life is always already political, if by “political” one intends not what modernity wants – which is to say a neutralizing mediation of immunitary nature – but rather an originary modality in which the living is or in which being *lives*’ [53]. According to Esposito, Nietzsche understands life as inherently political because of an originary vital impulse, which causes life to seek to develop, strengthen and ultimately overcome itself. The ‘Will to Power’ as it is commonly known contrasts sharply with all other modern political philosophies erected around the imperative of *conservatio*, which here is relegated to the status of a secondary instinct, with respect to the primary imperative of personal cultivation. In this way the will to power negates the immunity mechanisms put in place by the Hobbesian immunitary political structure; electing to disregard concerns for self-preservation, so as to expose life to the risk of death, as a means by which to affirm itself. As Esposito comments, ‘[it] moves as a vortex or a flame, disrupting or burning every defensive partition, every liminal diaphragm, every border of definition. It crosses what is diverse and joins what is separate until it absorbs, incorporates and devours everything it meets’ [54]. This continual transgression of life, beyond the limits of every protection given to it, generates an excess or surplus of life, as life pushes beyond itself and projects itself outward. As Esposito insists, this process of exteriorisation, creates ‘something that isn’t simply life – neither only life nor life only – but something that is both more than life and other than life’ [55].

Esposito theorises this surplus in the form Dionysian life, which at the moment of fulfilling its own acquisitive capacity threatens to ‘tip over, dissipating its own surplus of goods but also itself’ [56]. From here Esposito argues, Nietzsche develops two parallel yet incompatible responses to the Dionysian excess of life. The first views the immunitary apparatus constructed by the western political paradigm, as example of decadence, denying life of its full realisation, by overprotecting it. As such for life – understood as the will to power – to achieve its full potential these apparatus must be overturned, such that the immunitary mechanisms designed to protect life are inverted into a cultivation of death, targeting the weak and decadent forms of life. This Nietzschean ‘hyperimmunitary’ reaction to surplus life, is, Esposito insists; what transforms biopolitics into its thanatopolitical negation, and therefore that which ultimately leads to the politics of death which characterised the totalitarian National Socialist regime. However crucially for Esposito, Nietzsche also presents a second response to the Dionysian surplus of life centred around the apparent impossibility of discerning between affirmative and decadent forms of existence; that is distinguishing between ascendant and degenerate life. Furthermore for Nietzsche life can only overcome itself through encounters with sickness, struggle, and suffering, as Nietzsche himself comments ‘to live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering’ [57]. As such Nietzsche is led to the conclusion that only through embracing life in its otherness and decadence can life fulfil its ultimate potential. For Esposito this conclusion demonstrates clearly the possibility of developing a positive conception of biopolitics separate from the violence implicit in the logic of immunization, as following Nietzsche own logic, to achieve the status of the *ubermensch* the individual must open itself to the other, and become transversed by an alterity from which it emerges stronger. Here then as Esposito comments, ‘the difference between the two levels of discourse lies in the mode of understanding the relation with the “negative”’ [58]. Together these two interpretations of the ‘negative’, precariously juxtaposed form the basis of an analysis of the two principle declensions of modern biopolitics; one a politics *over* life, the other a politics *of* life. I shall now attempt to analyse Esposito’s investigation into both sides of the biopolitical dilemma, before proceeding to assess the merits and weaknesses of Esposito’s affirmative biopolitics.

In the penultimate chapter of *Bios*, Esposito asks why it was that Nazism more than any other form of political organisation, was able to ‘propel the homicidal temptation of biopolitics to its most complete realisation’ [59]? For Esposito; Foucault and Agamben wrongly diagnose this inversion of biopolitics as a symptom of traditional forms of sovereign power; by contrast Esposito insists, that the violent logic implicit in his own paradigm of immunization provides a far more compelling and accurate explanation, as it is only through the category of immunity that the lethal paradox of biopolitics is revealed. Here Esposito outlines in detail the process by which Nazi ideology demonised and categorised the ‘degenerated’, as a form of life unworthy of life itself, as well as its construction of immunitary apparatuses designed to curtail the ‘degenerates’ progress, both politically and biologically. Crucially for

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Esposito the immunitary paradigm also enables us to recognise the 'homoeopathic tonality' of these Nazis genocidal and eugenic policies, whereby the promotion of death was seen as a means by which the German people could be regenerated. In this way the generalised homicide of the holocaust was seen by the Nazi regime, not as an attempt to end life as such, but rather to excavate the death that existed in life, that is the forms of life conceived as the living dead, and in doing so strengthen the Aryan race. This Esposito claims is the 'unique logical semantic chain that links s degeneration, regeneration, and genocide' [60] under the Nazi regime, and that which would form the basis for the three principle thanatopolitical dispositifs of Nazism, namely, the *absolute normativization of life*, the *double enclosure of the body*, and the *anticipatory suppression of birth*.

In the first of these dispositifs, we see how under the National Socialists regime, the state took an ever increasing role in the regulation of the biological sphere, to the extent that they began to overlap and interweave. As Esposito observes in the absolute normativization of life, 'we can say that the two semantic vectors of immunity *dispositifs*, the biological and the juridical, for the first time are completely superimposed according to the double register of the biologization of the *nomos* and simultaneously that of the juridicalization of *bios*' [61]. This relationship between biology and the state, allowed the Nazis to declare the existence of a biological norm of life. which through the introduction of a caesuras in the biological continuum addressed by biopolitics, enabled the imposition of a normative distinction between the superior *ghenos* and degenerate life, or life which conformed to the state norm and that which did not.

The Second immunitary dispositif, relates to what Esposito calls the *double enclosure of the body*, whereby the body and the soul or 'spirit' become wholly coincidental, as all distinction between them are collapsed. As Esposito comments, for Nazi theoreticians, 'the soul is the body of the body, the enclosing of its closing, what from a subjective point of view blinds us to our objective imprisonment. It is the point of absolute coincidence of the body with itself, the consummation of every interval of difference within the impossibility of any transcendence' [62]. In this way the spiritual is reduced to the purely biological, such that any form of life must derive its identity and meaning from the body alone. However this imprisonment of the soul within the body represents only the first level of enclosure. The second Esposito argues, comes with the insertion of the individual body within the larger ethnic framework of the German people. It is only through this insertion that the individuals biological configuration is given a spiritual identity and meaning, and through which all forms of life are biopolitically adjudicated. As Esposito observes, 'it is only at this point...that the body of every German will completely adhere to itself, not as simple flesh, an existence without life, but as the incarnation of the racial substance from which life itself receives its essential form – provided, naturally, that it has the force to expel from itself all of that which doesn't belong to it' [63].

The third and final thanatopolitical dispositif that Esposito identifies is the, *anticipatory suppression of birth*; a practice evident in the programmes of mass sterilization of the old and 'degenerate', as well as the policy of castration for homosexuals. What is interesting for Esposito however is that these campaigns of preventative mutilation and violence, were adopted during a feverish pro-natalist campaign undertaken by the Nazi regime to promote the quantitative and qualitative development of the German people. According to Esposito this contradiction is evidence once again, of the thanatopolitical logic implicit in the immunitary paradigm, designed to protect the Aryan race, from decadent and degenerative forces, whilst encouraging its own development and procreation. Here then, this genocidal logic is directed not at life, but its genesis; celebrating and supporting those births located within the biopolitical norms domain, whilst suppressing those which were not. In this way each birth was categorizable in relation to its ethnic configuration, as Esposito observes, 'it wasn't birth that determined the political role of the living being, but its position in the political-racial calculation that predetermined the value of its birth' [64].

Together these three Nazi dispositifs constitute the semantic logic and strategies of the thanatopolitical inflection of biopolitics, which Esposito identifies as the target of his 'deconstruction'. For Esposito updating the biopolitical lexicon, or 'skirting Nazi semantics', is not sufficient if biopolitics is to escape the logic of immunity and open a space for an affirmative biopolitics open to an originary sense of *communitas*. Instead Esposito proposes the complete inversion and penetration of the thanatopolitical principles of life, body and birth, just outlined. In this way Esposito claims he will be able to 'open the black box of biopolitics', allowing him to interpret life philosophically as irreducible to biology, and so contrary to Agamben, how *zoe* and *bios* cannot be separated or opposed. Finally only in this way Esposito insists will it be possible to formulate a emancipatory politics, 'no longer over life but of life, one that doesn't

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superimpose already constituted (and by now destitute) categories of modern politics on life, but rather inscribes the innovative power of a life rethought in all its complexity and articulation in the same politics' [65].

Esposito begins his 'deconstruction with the second dispositif discussed above, the *double enclosure of the body*. In contrast to the Nazis understanding of 'existence without life' as that which does not meet the necessary ethnic and biological qualifications to completely integrate itself into the political body of the nation; Esposito proposes the adoption of the conception of *flesh*, developed by Merleau-Ponty, as a term with which to interpret these forms of existence as that which does not 'coincide with the body... that part or zone of the body, the body's membrane, that isn't one with the body, that exceeds its boundaries or is subtracted from the body's enclosing' [66]. Through this distinction and separation between the body and flesh, Esposito attempts to escape the logic of immunity by showing how flesh opens the body, exposing it to the otherness of the world outside itself. For Esposito this openness of flesh to that which lays outside itself, enables us to begin to theorise a relationship between the body and the communal *munus*, and therefore start to imagine the possibility of a biopolitics not tied to the immunitary protection of the individual.

Second part of Esposito's deconstruction targets the third dispositif identified, that of the suppression of birth. Using the same the argumentation as with he's adoption of the concept of flesh, Esposito insists that a new born stands in a condition of complete differentiation in relation to their mother, extraneous and unique to anything which may of come before. Under this interpretation natality functions as the '*munus* that opens [the identity of individual and collective subjects] to that which it does not recognize itself' [67]. Drawing on the work Gilbert Simondon, Esposito claims that we must emphasis the point of distinction between birth and death as well as the innovative potentiality implicit in the act of birth, in this way, 'it isn't sufficient to define living as an organism. The living is an organism on the basis of the first individuation.... to *live* is to perpetuate a birth that is permanent and relative' [68]. Thus only through a process of continual individuation can we hope to reverse the suppression of birth employed by Nazism, as Esposito argues, 'the only way for life to defer death isn't to preserve it as such (perhaps in the immunitary form of negative protection) but rather to be reborn continually in different guises' [69].

In the final part of his deconstruction of thanatopolitical dispositifs, Esposito attempts to rethink the relationship between norm and life in the biopolitical thought of Nazism. As discussed earlier Nazi ideology insisted upon the existence of a 'norm' of biological life, which when applied, could distinguish between 'degenerate' and biologically and ethnically superior forms of life. In opposition to this assertion, Esposito draws on the work of Spinoza to elaborate a non-immunitary semantic, in which no singular or primary norm exists. Instead Esposito suggests we must conceive of the existence of a multiplicity of norms, which acknowledge and consider the multiply processes of individuation, and the ways in which the human body, 'lives in a infinite series of relations with the bodies of others' [70]. Such a recognition would for Esposito undermine the idea of 'otherness' critical to the operation of an immunitary system, and instead foster an outwardly focused and tolerate *munus*, characterised by its acceptance and celebration of difference.

Taken together the deconstruction of these three principle dispositifs of the Nazi state will form the basis of an emancipatory politics, erected not around the semantic logic and strategies of Nazi thanatopolitics, but rather around the normative power of biological life itself. Here Esposito returns to the fundamental problem addressed by Bios; of how to develop an affirmative concept of biopolitics which conceives bios as a qualified and communal form of life, without it becoming inscribed within the very systems of immunization from which it is trying to escape. In the concluding pages of Bios Esposito draws on Giles Deleuze's final essay 'Pure Immanence' to counterpoise the absolute immanence of the individual, implicit in the logic of immunity, with what he described as indefinite or 'singular life', as Deleuze himself comments, 'the life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life...a "Homo tantum" with whom everybody 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... The life of ...individuality fades away in favour 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' [71]. For Esposito it is precisely the concepts of flesh and of the individuating birth, elaborated earlier, which will bring Homo tantum into being, and which will generate a 'norm of life that doesn't subject life to the transcendence of a norm, but makes the norm the immanent impulse of life' [72]. Here Esposito interprets Deleuze's singular life as the antithesis of the thanatopolitical bifurcation of life which underpinned

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the Nazis genocidal drive. Thus in contrast to the normalized individual this impersonal yet singular life, understands all forms of life in their unity, such that all life is inscribed in bios, this is because as Esposito comments 'every life is a form of life and every form refers to life' [73]. This adoption of a Deleuzian interpretation of life, enables Esposito to disrupt immunity's negation of *communitas*, by exposing life to what is held in common. As such in contrast to the Nazis double enclosure of the subject, 'an impersonal singularity... rather than being imprisoned in the confines of the individual, open those confines to an eccentric movement that "transverse men...independently of the matter of their individuation and the forms of their personality' [74]. Furthermore as already alluded, to in contrast to Agamben, this interpretation of life allows for no separation between bios and zoe, instead as Timothy Campbell concludes through this understanding of the relationship between life and power, 'it now becomes possible to 'posit bios as not in opposition to zoe but as its ultimate horizon' [75]. Here then Esposito counters Agamben's rejection of biological life as the focal point for the production of an affirmative politics. Unlike Agamben who claims that any reference to a naturalised form of life will reproduce the aporetic violence of exception, Esposito insists that through the rejection of traditional political categories of thought as tools for the analysis of biopower and the re-articulation of the relationship between power and life, this aporia can be overturned, such that biological life becomes the site of a productive and emancipatory politics.

The political and philosophical challenge assumed by Esposito in *Bios*, as well as his earlier works, is undoubtedly an ambitious one; seeking not only to overcome the functionary duality of biopolitics and provide an emancipatory political philosophy, but also develop a new and original understanding of political modernity through a critical deconstruction of traditional categories of political thought. Central to both these objectives is Esposito's own paradigm of immunization, which he distinguishes as the primary catalyst and stimulant in the transition from early modernity to the contemporary biopolitical paradigm. Although providing an original and distinctive addition to the theoretical and analytical toolbox of biopolitical discourse, by viewing the genealogical development of biopolitics through such a narrow and restricted analytical lens, Esposito prevents himself from fully explaining the complex and manifold ways in which biopolitics is shadowed by its potential negation. Furthermore the limited selection of historical illustrations included in *Bios*, clearly demonstrate the unwillingness of Esposito to register and acknowledge alternative interpretations of the genealogical development of biopolitics, as well as those historical events which do not fit comfortably into the schema of immunity. Particularly revealing in this respect is Esposito's complete neglect of the multifarious ways in which life has been continual reconceptualised in relation to the emergence and development of biotechnologies, genetic engineering and biochemistry over the past fifty years; all of which leaves Esposito with a notably restricted understanding of the various intersections between biopolitical and thanatopolitical discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In addition to the limited use the immunitary paradigm as an interpretative tool of biopolitical phenomenon; Esposito repeatedly fails to provide a sufficient degree conceptual differentiation in relation to his central concept of immunity; refusing to adopt either its legalistic or biological definition, and instead opting to play with the terms semantic ambivalences. As Erik Empson alludes to 'because of the multiple derivations of sense he can have his proverbial cake and eat it; the whole can constitute itself through its parts, whilst unpalatable slices can be left on the table' [76]. In this way the application of immunisation assumes an ambiguous quality, at one stage a mechanism through which the individual divorces himself from the community, at another the an internal defensive apparatus of the community. As such Esposito ultimately fails in his attempt to overturn traditional categories of political thought as the ambiguity and obscurity of his conceptualisation of immunity, shows not only a lack of conviction but suggest that Esposito's deconstruction is nothing more than an 'inconsequential verbal stunt in a semantic universe without gravity' [77].

This semantic trickery is however merely symptomatic of a far deeper problem with Esposito's attempt to provide the basis for an affirmative biopolitics. In an introduction to Esposito's work, Timothy Campbell comments that *Bios*, is 'nothing short of a modern genealogy of biopolitics that begins and ends in philosophy' [78]. Indeed here Campbell seems unwittingly to have identified the source of Esposito's difficulty; that is the problem of developing a coherent and applicable conception of an affirmative biopolitics from within the limited bounds of abstract philosophy. In contrast to Foucault who emphasised the empiricists of any engagement with biopolitics, Esposito can only restrict himself to investigating the language and semantics of biopolitical regimes. Thus although Foucault recognised the importance of questioning the development and functioning of political discourse, the primary goal of his genealogical method was to address empirical and historical developments of the referent object of biopower as well as those

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other elements which lay outside of the field of language and discourse. As Foucault himself insisted, 'I believe one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power not relations of meaning...semiotics, as the structure of communication cannot account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts...semiology is a way of avoiding [conflicts] violent, bloody and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue' [79]. Thus although Esposito may be justified in attempting to 'correct' Foucault's analysis and resolve his supposed hermeneutic uncertainty; it remains doubtful whether this is possible from the perspective of pure philosophy.

Finally although Esposito successfully identifies the development of a lethal duality within biopolitical discourse, his attempt to reverse the dispositifs and language of thanatopolitics, ultimately fails to overcome the morbidity, violence and death inherent in its logic. By inverting the semantics of the Nazi dispositifs to emphasise flesh over the body, natality over mortality, and individuation over biological norms, Esposito seeks to overturn their logic and transcend the pathological potential of biopolitics. However what Esposito fails to recognise is that despite transposing the semantics and language of thanatopolitics; the form of 'life' which he seeks to articulate and emphasise, nevertheless maintains a binary relationship with morbidity and death. As Michael Dillon observes, 'it does not matter with which end of the life/death cycle biopolitics deals... biopolitically speaking you are always already implicated in both from the beginning' [80].

As such in spite of his unique and bold contribution to the debate concerning the thanatopolitical duality of biopolitics, Esposito ultimately fails in his attempt to provide a basis for a emancipatory political philosophy of life. In response to the difficulties met by Esposito in attempting to escape the contradictory structure of biopolitics, I will now proceed to analyse Agamben's own response to the aporetic violence of exception which relies upon messianic violence to escape biopolitics.

## Agamben's Messianism: Form-of-Life and the Coming Community

*'Today everything is theology, except what the theologians declare to be such'*  
**Carl Schmitt[81]**

Despite Agamben's association with a radically negative and pessimistic understanding of contemporary politics, related to the aporetic violence of sovereignty outlined in *Homo Sacer*. Dispersed throughout much of Agamben's work are references to scared time and the possibility of a redemptive politics to come. Ultimately the success of Agamben's philosophical project will rest upon his ability to formulate these redemptive remnants into a coherent conceptualisation of the messianic time, which will enable us to transcend the thanatopolitical duality of biopolitics. Writing in *Homo Sacer* Agamben comments that, 'until a completely new politics – that is, a politics no longer founded on the *exceptio* of bare life – is at hand, every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile, and the "beautiful day" of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it' [82]. As such Agamben insists, the only response available to a sovereign power which reaches its apotheosis with the normalization of exception and the production of bare life, is the opening of a messianic time in the name of a coming community. For Agamben this messianic redemption will be facilitated by the inauguration of a form of 'happy life', lived in pure immanence to itself, and in which the separation of *zoe* and *bios* will be impossible. Such a form of life Agamben claims will undermine the production of bare life by overturning the conditions of its biopolitical capture, and so cease the exceptional violence of sovereign power. Of course the application of concepts such as salvation, redemption and the messianic may seem somewhat peculiarly, even regressive when discussed in relation to contemporary political theory. However as many commentators have highlighted, it is only through the contradistinction of messianic theology, with the values of liberal modernity, that modern political thought can be properly critiqued, and brought fully into focus[83]. As such in the following section I will seek to analyse Agamben's messianism as a response to both the sovereign capture of life, and the functionary duality of biopolitics.

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Earlier I demonstrated how Agamben conceived of the subject of the law, as existing in a condition of 'abandonment', a term borrowed from Jean-Luc Nancy, who described the law of abandonment as that which applies through its withdrawal, and in which an 'abandoned being finds itself deserted to the degree that it finds itself remitted, entrusted, or thrown to the law', adding that 'abandonments only law... is to be without return and without recourse' [84]. It is on this final point concerning the intransigence and irretractability of the state of abandonment that Agamben finds his analysis diverging from that of Nancy's. Contrary to Nancy, Agamben insists that if we are to ultimately overcome abandonment, and realise a messianic redemption of life, we must first extend the condition of abandonment to its most extreme formulation, where it transcends and overturns the law being-in-force without significance and moves beyond the state of nihilism. Here Agamben distinguishes between what he calls 'imperfect' and 'perfect' or 'messianic' nihilism; a distinction synonymous with Benjamin's own 'virtual' and 'real state' of emergency [85]. The first or 'imperfect' form of nihilism, nullifies the law, yet preserves the impotent structure of the law, allowing 'the Nothing [to] subsist indefinitely in the form of a being in force without significance' [86]. By contrast the 'perfect' or 'messianic' form of nihilism, 'nullifies even the Nothing and lets no form of law remain in force beyond its own content' [87]. It is this second form of nihilism which Agamben claims is capable of overcoming the laws being without significance and therefore escape the grasp of the sovereign ban and its biopolitical capture of life. Crucially for Agamben this overcoming of the law being without significance, does not simple entail the substitution of one form of law for another, nor does it require the restoration of some forgotten archaic law; as both these responses would merely reproduce the political aporia of abandonment in a new form. Instead Agamben insists it must provoke an ethos which is paradoxically radically new and yet completely familiar, brought about by a 'small displacement that seems to leave everything intact', and yet realises '*that which has never been*' [88]. Only through the initiation of that new future – the that which has never been – in the present, can the Nothing of the law without significance be completely overturned, and so zoe and bios finally reconciled in their singularity. As Agamben proclaims, 'at this point, in which generator and generated, memory and hope, elegy and hymn, oneness and repetition, exchange parts, happiness is achieved... this -what has *never happened* – is the historical and wholly actual homeland of humanity' [89].

The question remains however exactly what shape this new future will take? For Agamben any form of future politics facilitated through messianic redemption must be constructed around what Agamben terms 'happy life' or 'form-of-life' [90], through which life can become lived in pure immanence and the separation of life between zoe and bios overcome. Contained within this form-of-life is what Agamben identifies as the messianic remnant, that is that element which is common to all living, or that part of life which is most resistant to the exercise of sovereign power as Agamben explains, it is 'an indissoluble cohesion in which it is impossible to isolate something like bare life' [91]. Thus this 'form-of-life' is precisely that which is not bare life, that which is immune to the separation of life and insusceptible to sovereign power over life. As Agamben observes, 'in the face of state sovereignty which can affirm itself only by separating in every context naked life from its form, is the power that incessantly reunites life to its form...this is form-of-life' [92]. As such Agamben insists it is only through the resistant qualities of form-of-life that the aporia of exception and the biopolitical capture of bare life can be inverted, and which holds the possibility of an alternative politics, as Patrick O'Connor observes, in happy life' Agamben, 'attempts to find and recuperate traces of human life in the detritus of modern nihilism, constructing an alternative idea of politics out of the remnants of human waste' [93].

Importantly this redemptive and revolutionary conception of futurity contrasts with the 'weak messianics' posited by Jacques Derrida, in which the condition of contemporary politics is characterised by a chronic indeterminacy and the continual deferral of political decisions, 'where the "to come" is not outside of our time, but the spectral potentiality of every political, moral, juridical decision' [94]. For Agamben this particular form of messianism would lead to an indefinite negotiation with the law, reproducing the aporia of exception and so reinscribing the distinction between zoe and bios central to the operation of sovereign power. Instead Agamben claims that a redemptive politics can come into being only when the law being-in-force without significance is rendered completely inoperative and overcome in its totality. Here Agamben adopts Benjamin's concept of 'pure violence' as outlined in 'Critique of Violence', as a mean by which to interrupt the duality established between law and violence. For Benjamin this 'pure violence' exists outside the juridical categories of state violence, and cannot be reduced to any instrumental relation between means and ends. In this way 'pure violence' is not constituted or mediated by sovereignty, but acts only in relation to itself, a 'pure medium', which 'exposes and severs the nexus between law and violence and thus appears

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in the end not as violence that governs or executes but as violence that purely acts and manifests' [95]. Here then Agamben offers an emancipatory and redemptive hope, by asserting the possibility of a violence beyond any relation to law, and thus beyond the juridical categories of norm and exception immanent to sovereign power over life.

This insistence upon a complete overhaul of the law in force without significance through the [implementation] of pure violence gives us a further insight into Agamben's rejection of the body as a site of resistance to sovereignty and the biopolitical capture of bare life; as for Agamben the body exists inside profane temporality. By contrast what Agamben is attempting to construct is a politics based upon a life lived in its own unity, existing in a time external to the chronological temporality of the body, and so beyond the reach of the law in force without significance. It is in this way that Agamben claims to have overcome and escaped the biopolitical capture of life, and to have provided a redemptive hope for humanity external to the problems of biopolitics. As Agamben himself comments,

*'the "happy life" on which political philosophy should be founded thus cannot be either the naked life that sovereignty posits as a presupposition so as to turn it into its own subject or the impenetrable extranity of science and of modern biopolitics that everybody tries in vain to sacralize. This "happy life" should be rather, an absolutely profane "sufficient life" that has reached the perfection of its own power and its own communicability – a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold' [96].*

Although Agamben's rejection of the structural openness and infinite deferral of Derrida's 'messianic without messianism', in favour of an escathological messianism, enables him to realize his redemptive goal of [bringing about] the end *tout court* of law and the state form. His adoption of 'pure violence' as a mechanism for overturning sovereign power, has left him vulnerable to criticism for theorists including Derrida himself; who share a different interpretation of Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* and the applicability of pure violence as a redemptive tool. For Derrida, Benjamin is mistaken in his attempt to distinguish divine violence from political violence, as for him the two are mutually contaminating, and so equally implicated in the exercise of domination over life. As such in attempting to maintain a distinction between state violence and pure violence, Benjamin ultimately risks mirroring and recreating forms of violence he sought to escape, thereby reinforcing the structures of sovereign power. Here then Benjamin's text 'takes on a decidedly theologico-metaphysical tone... his relapse here into a theologically inflected history of philosophy of history – the historical decline from a pure origin to a teleological conclusion through revolutionary repetition – signall[ing] his complicity with cyrpto-metaphysical thinkers such as Schmitt' [97]. In the post-script to Derrida's essay 'Force of Law', Derrida takes this accusation to the extreme, implicating Benjamin's divine violence in the horrors of the holocaust. Venturing to describe how Benjamin may have interpreted the Nazis' Final Solution, Derrida suggests that 'Benjamin would have judged vain and without pertinence...any juridical trail of Nazism... any judgemental apparatus, any historiography still homogeneous with the space in which Nazism developed... any interpretation drawing on philosophical, moral, sociological, psychological or psychoanalytic concepts' [98]. In short Benjamin would have thought it impossible to describe the uniqueness of the holocaust from within its own system, structure and logic. Instead Derrida claims, Benjamin would have tried to adopt the perspective of those whom the Nazis' tried to exterminate, that is from the point of view of those others 'which haunted it at once from without and within' [99]. In this way Derrida insists the significance of the Final Solution can be measured only by a metric which stands outside of it. The shocking implication of this suggestion is that for Derrida the holocaust must be thought of as an 'uninterpretable manifestation of divine violence insofar as this divine violence would be at the same time nihilating, expiatory and bloodless... a divine violence that would destroy current law through a bloodless process that strikes and causes to expiate' [100]. Although Derrida's association of Benjamin's divine violence with the holocaust is highly contentious, it does draw necessary attention to the difficulty of maintaining a distinction between sovereign or state violence, and the pure violence of revolutionary messianism. In this way Derrida is able to bring into question, Agamben's attempts to overturn law in force without significance through the implementation of pure violence, and so dispute the pertinence and validity of his revolutionary messianism, which for Derrida will forever be haunted by 'the theme of radical destruction, extermination, total annihilation, beginning with the annihilation of the law and right, if not of justice' [101]. Thus although Agamben's messianism may be capable of escaping the biopolitical paradigm, the destination is not necessarily disengaged from its brutality. As such I will now proceed to analyse Arendt's conception of natality which whilst capable of overcoming the thanatopolitical potential of biopower, nevertheless maintains an explicit reference to life and biopolitics.

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## Hannah Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics

*'Natality not mortality may be the central category of political as distinguished from metaphysical thought' [102].*  
**Hannah Arendt**

Hannah Arendt is widely recognised as one of the most influential and original political thinkers of the twentieth century, addressing a broad range of topics within political theory including, revolution, totalitarianism, the nature of power and freedom, as well as the role of political action in modernity. Although the dispersive complex and some would argue discontinuous nature of Arendt's work, makes it difficult to identify a definitive and linear political theory, the startling conceptual distinctions, and intricate webs of over-lapping and related thematic strands which permeate all her work, provides fertile ground for the analysis of an array of political categories and issues. The alinearity and ambiguity of Arendt's work has unsurprisingly led to a variety of contrasting and opposing interpretations. In *Homo Sacer* for example Agamben makes extensive reference Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, and its reduction of human life to species existence, in *Bios* too, Esposito, makes use Arendt's work in his analysis of Nazism and racial regeneration. However what these and numerous other interpretations of Arendt theory of action and life fail to acknowledge, is the subtle biopolitical dimension of Arendt's work, embodied by her conception of political natality. Thus contrary to many commentators who have labelled Arendt as anti-naturalistic, I will follow a similar line of [argument] as that proposed by Miguel Vatter amongst others, in claiming that through reference to human freedom ontological rooted in the fact of natality Arendt is able both to reconnect freedom and politics with biological life, and to overcome the violent duality of biopolitics. As I hope to demonstrate this concept avoids the philosophical abstraction identified in Esposito, whilst also enabling the disengagement of life from death, through the introduction of a temporal dis-juncture in biological process. Furthermore unlike Agamben's apocalyptic messianism, natality possesses a 'weak messianic' force which is dependant not on the coming of a messiah or the ending of history as such, but rather on the interruption of processional temporality, and the potentiality implicit in a freedom base upon 'beginning'. In this way Arendt is able to avoid reconstituting the violence of sovereignty, and instead develops the foundation of an affirmative biopolitics, rooted in natality rather than mortality.

Just like Agamben and Esposito, Arendt was acutely aware of the antinomical and contradictory nature of the modern political project in which, 'the modern age, which proclaims the value of life above all else, is also the age of genocidal mass murder' [103]. Writing in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973), Arendt identified the newly emergent phenomenon of totalitarianism as a novel, yet 'essential' form of government, one which must necessarily correspond and appeal to some 'basic human experience' [104]. This is of course not to suggest that Arendt believed that Nazism or the Holocaust were in anyway inevitable or unavoidable, simply that Nazi ideology was able to reveal and exploit the thanatopolitical potential implicit in traditional categories of modern political discourse. Arendt more than any other political theorist since the Second World War, understood the operation of totalitarianism as well as the nexus between racial 'regeneration' and eugenic violence. As such it will be worthwhile to first briefly rehearse Arendt's analysis of the biopolitical functioning principles of totalitarian rule, before assessing how Arendt proposes to counter them.

In the *Human Condition* (1958), Arendt noted an extensive widening of the realm of 'life processes' within modernity, as well as the promotion of the act of 'labour' designed to sustain its cycle of production and consumption. According to Arendt in the modern age the act of labouring has replaced political action as the most important human activity, as society seeks to satisfy its need for the continual production and consumption of goods in increasing abundance. In this sense Arendt claims modern man is reduced to the status of '*animal laborans*', that is to a subject whose individuality is lost in the process of feeding and sustaining economical production and social consumption. Furthermore in a claim which parallels Agamben's conception of bare life, Arendt insists that under the modern totalitarian regimes, this 'political zoeification of human life' [105] was intensified as individuals were stripped of all civil, political and human rights. The result of which was to 'achieve "total domination" through the destruction of the "uniqueness" and the "individuality" of human beings' such that they could 'be transformed into specimens of the human animal' [106]. Related to this process Arendt also observed the transformation of politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from a sphere of political action to one of the administration and management of life. Again this trend is



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exacerbated under totalitarian rule, where open debate and spontaneous action is replaced by conformity and subordination to the imposed political and social norms. In this way individual life now became indistinct from and homogeneous to species life, which itself became the target of political power, as Arendt observes, 'what was left was a "natural force" the force of the life process itself, to which all men and human activities were equally submitted... none of the higher capacities of man was any longer necessary to connect individual life with the life of the species; individual life became part of the life process' [107]. It is because of such observations that many theorists including Agamben himself, have recognised Arendt as the first to fully comprehend the centrality of life in modern political discourse; and indeed it is precisely these processes of depoliticisation identified by Arendt that Foucault would later redefine in biopolitical terms. As such although the term biopolitics did not appear in Arendt's work, her analysis demonstrates an acute awareness of the biopolitical nature of totalitarianism as well as the functionary duality of a politics erected around the problem of species life.

It is clear then from the arguments outlined above, that Arendt strongly renounced the reduction of politics to the mere management and organisation of life processes. However it is important to note that in contrast to many interpreters who insist that Arendtian politics must therefore be reliant on the complete separation of qualified life (bios) from biological or animal life (zoe); by reference to the concept of natality Arendt is in fact able to politicise zoe, and so allow a reconciliation of life with politics. Thus rather than ascribing to Arendt's political thought the Aristotelian distinction between bios and zoe outright, if we are to situate Arendt thought within the biopolitical horizon, it is crucial that we first examine the *philosophical* basis for her rejection of the totalitarian administration of life. Firstly in opposition to the Aristotelian 'naturalisation' of politics, Arendt insists that man can be conceived as a political being only when acting as part of a plurality, that is politics only emerges in the interactions between individual subjects. Related to this observation Arendt suggests that rather than conceiving of man as originating from a single and common progenitor we should comprehend creation, as the creation of man *and* woman, who through the fact of natality constitute a plurality of beings. Such an understanding of creation allows Arendt to, 'deconstruct the "humanist" opposition between animality [*plura simul issit existere*] and humanity [*ex uno homine*] based on the distinction between zoe and bios' [108]. Thus for Arendt if it is possible to contemplate an affirmative politics which is resistant to the thanatopolitical logic of totalitarianism, it will depend not as many interpreters have suggested on the separation of biological life from the political realm, but on the contrary on the politicization of those forms of life that are immune to domination. In this way Arendt's conception of natality can be seen not only as a counter to thanatopolitics, but one concerned as much with life, as totalitarianism is concerned with death. On this reading totalitarian rule based upon the reduction of individual life to 'mere life', *and* an 'Arendtian politics, based on the revaluation of the birth and plurality of precisely such individual [life], *both* belong within the discursive matrix that Foucault would much later call "biopolitics"' [109]. Thus for Arendt if life can become the target of thanatopolitical power and control, then it must also be capable of resistance to such power. Here we can locate Arendt's notion of natality as an alternative way of conceiving the relationship between life, politics and temporality, which whilst situated within the biopolitical episteme, nevertheless has the potential to counter and escape the violence of biopolitics' negative declension.

The category of natality naturally includes a preliminary manifestation in the creation of new life through the act of birth. However crucially for Arendt natality also contains a secondary manifestation, understood as a 'second birth' in which an individual enters into the public realm. This political form of natality can be seen not as the antithesis of the first birth but rather its confirmation; that is the opportunity to exercise the capacity and freedom to make a new beginning, with which all men are endowed with by virtue of being born. For Arendt this act of new beginning takes the form of political action, exercised within the public sphere, and directed towards the maintenance of the condition of plurality, as Patricia Bowen-Moore, comments, 'the experience of political natality is the supreme actualisation of the capacity for beginning inasmuch as its singular orientation is directed toward the world of human affairs while its special concern is to uphold the experience of plurality, as the condition which distinguishes a community of political actors' [110]. For Arendt the engagement of an individual in such political action, that is the making of a new beginning is the most sublime expression of human freedom. Indeed it is only through this form of action that the freedom inherent in the fact of natality can be realised, as Arendt herself argues, 'the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is of acting' [111]. Furthermore according to Arendt, this freedom must be enacted within the public sphere, that is experienced through the interaction and engagement with other free acting subjects; or put another way freedom

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must be 'phenomenolisable'. It is here that the importance of our earlier discussion on human plurality becomes apparent, as the exercise of such freedom publicly is only possible under a condition of plurality. Indeed as alluded above to the experience of plurality defined as the 'fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world' [112], is central for Arendt's understanding of political life. According to Arendt the entire Western tradition of political thought has failed to recognise the distinction between 'Man' conceived as a species, and 'Men' understood as a plurality of individuals. The failure to acknowledge this distinction has led theorist from Aristotle onward to claim politics as in some way inherent in human nature, and so to conceive politics from the standpoint of man as a species rather than from the view of their original differentiation. In contrast Arendt insists that 'man is apolitical. Politics arises between men, and so quite outside of man. There is therefore no political substance. Politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships' [113]. Thus the possibility of freedom realised through political action and rooted in the fact of natality, is conditioned by the experience of plurality through which a space for the exercise of meaningful political action is created.

Here of course Arendt does not mean to suggest, that the political life instigated by natality, is in any way immune from the emergence of the thanatopolitical or totalitarian regimes which plagued the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, nor that the political action exercised within this realm is free from the contingency and uncertainty, which characterises the human condition and the experience of plurality. Instead she suggests that these uncertainties can be alleviated by the act of forgiveness, promise-making, and the adjudicated of action by the community. The act of forgiveness permits the community as well as the perpetrator to start afresh, and so not be confined by the consequence of a single misjudgement. Engagement in promise making and keeping allows the community introduce an element of consistency to their interactions and affairs without sacrificing their freedom. Whilst the adjudication of political actions by the community, allows the plurality to judge the relative merits of a particular act, and so bestow upon it meaning and significance. Taken together the concepts of freedom and plurality, rooted in natality and conditioned by forgiveness, promising-making, and communal adjudication, provide Arendt with a mechanism with which to counter totalitarian power over life, as I shall now demonstrate.

In view of the analysis outlined above, it is clear that in terms of the [facilitation] human freedom, totalitarian thanatopolitics represents the absolute antithesis of political natality. Indeed for Arendt the systematic denial of human freedom and the curtailment of the capacity of individuals to express their individuality through public action, demonstrates a complete perversion of the principles of natality. Here then the ultimate aim of the thanatopolitical power over life, is the neutralization and eventual eradication of the capacity of any individual to engage in spontaneous and individuating action, thereby generating the species 'man', rendering 'the singularization of life superfluous', and 'mak[ing] out of many the One' [114]. Thus with the eradication of human plurality, individuals are reduced to mere life, dehumanised and stripped of their freedom to 'begin', as Arendt, poignantly observes,

*'the supreme goal of all totalitarian governments is not only the freely admitted, long-range ambition to global rule but also the never-admitted attempt at the total domination of man. The concentration camps are the laboratories in the experiment of total domination, for human nature being what it is, this goal can be achieved only under extreme circumstances of human made hell. Total domination is achieved when the human person, who somehow is a specific mixture of spontaneity and conditioned being, has been transformed into a completely conditioned being whose reactions can be calculated even when he is led to certain death' [115].*

The remedy for this perversion Arendt insists, can be found in the very category of political natality subject to corruption. For her natality decisively obstructs the formulation of a human species, as natality produces only singular, unique and diverse subjects, completely detached and distinct to what came previously, whilst existing in a condition of absolute potentiality. Thus each new birth represents a new beginning and a radical break from what came before, as Arendt writes, 'it is the nature of beginning... that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings' [116]. This interruption of natural processes through the introduction of a unique and unprecedented reality, critically disrupts any totalitarian endeavour to gain complete control over life, by resisting reduction to biological calculability. As such totalitarianism, writes Arendt 'knows neither birth nor death' [117], as the contingency

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and newness of birth makes its result indeterminate. In this way each time a human being acts politically from a position of contingency and potentiality given to it by its new beginning, a new set of realities is inserted into the political sphere shared by all in common, enlarging the field of political experience and therefore the capacity to actualise human freedom. It is important to mention at this point however that Arendt connected natality and so the freedom to begin to the trace of divine creation. Writing on natality in the *Human Condition* Arendt states that 'with the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself... the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before' [118]. Thus the freedom imbued by birth is not a given, rather it is a praxis dependant on the memory of creation. In this way, 'natality naturalises history as much as it historicizes nature', creation is therefore to be understood as the mechanism by which nature and biological life is emancipated an 'emancipation that nature cannot achieve out of itself' [119].

By focusing on natality over mortality Arendt is able to introduce a break in processual time and biological process. Here life can be understood not as a transitory period between the profane and the eternal or divine, nor as a means of sustaining the ongoing development of humanity, but quite simply an 'interval between life and death' [120], an opening in the homogeneous time of biological process into which something new is inserted. This is possible Arendt argues because of the inherent faculty of individuals to re-enact the 'miracle' of their birth, through action, here 'miracles are clearly not supernatural events but only what all miracles, those performed by men no less than those performed by a divine agent, always must be, namely, interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected' [121]. For some the miraculous power which Arendt ascribes to human action, has a distinctly redemptive and even messianic quality [122]. Crucially however, Arendt's insistence upon the *profane* nature of miracles, means that her unique form of messianism, must not be associated with the apocalyptic imagery, and revolutionary violence which characterises Benjamin's and Agamben's conception of the messianic, nor with a singular historic event which signals the coming of the messiah. But rather with the newness and potentiality generated by the miracles of action which occur repeatedly throughout history, as Arendt herself claims, history

*'is full of events; here the miracle of accident and infinite improbability occurs so frequently that it seems strange to speak of miracles at all. But the reason for this frequency is merely that historical processes are created and constantly interrupted by human initiative, by the intuition man is insofar as he is an acting being. Hence it is not in the least superstitious, it is even a counsel of realism, to look for the unforeseeable and unpredictable to be prepared for and to expect "miracles" in the political realm' [123].*

In this way Arendt's work can be seen as charged with what Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb described as a 'weak messianic force' [124], which whilst retaining the possibility of redemption is not reliant upon the intervention of some transcendental being to effectuate the end of history. Here then the messianic faculty of humanity is founded in not in the closing but the opening of time, its operation is temporal and its result by no means certain. Thus in Arendt we find a form of messianism which whilst offering salvation, is nevertheless founded in the actions of individuals operating within time, 'redemption, then, remains only a schema internal to the activities of the *vita activa* in relation to one another: this schema cannot be embodied in a salvational figure, nor even can it proceed into the world as an independent force' [125]. Put simply redemption is the freedom of biological life; rooted in natality and realized through political activity exercised between individual within the public sphere.

In the concept of natality then Arendt has identified an approach which effectively combines the redemptive power of messianism with a 'biopolitics that counters totalitarianism on its own terrain, namely by identifying what in life poses a resistance to the totalitarian project of attaining total domination over life' [126]. Thus by ontological rooting the human capacity to act in the fact of natality, Arendt succeeds in reconnecting freedom to biological life. In doing so Arendt is able to escape the violence inherent in the lethal paradox of biopolitics by insisting upon the absolute individuation and freedom generated by birth and so making life irreducible to a species being. In this way Arendt's rejection of totalitarian thanatopolitics must be seen not as evidence of her belief in a political human nature or then need to maintain a separation between *zoe* and *bios* but rather, on the basis that to deny the singularity of humanity or expression of individuality, is to negate natality and therefore the our capacity to be free. In contrast to Esposito,

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her this form of resistance to totalitarian power is founded not upon the abstract interplay of language or the inversion of political discourse, but rather political action exercised within the public sphere. Moreover like Derrida, Arendt would have rejected the 'strong messianics' proposed by Agamben as dangerous, and likely to reproduce sovereign violence; instead her 'inconspicuous messianism', hails the interruptive power of action. This messianic power does not rely upon the coming of a messiah nor on the end of history, but is rather contingent and unstable. As such she replaces the continual and endless procession toward death, with the capacity to interrupt time and to begin anew, and so prevent the thanatopolitical domination of life processes. Thus whereas Esposito fails to escape the life/death duality of biological life processes] the 'weak messianic force of natality introduces a break in the processional time of biological process addressed by biopolitics and so is able to interrupt the thanatopolitical domination of life. This disruption is for Arendt created only by our unique capacity to begin, it is this alone which ensures our freedom, As Arendt concludes, 'but there remains the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only 'message' which the end can ever produce. Beginning before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – 'that a beginning be made man was created' said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed everyman' [127].

## Conclusion

Today biopolitics has – to use a Foucauldian phrase – 'crossed the epistemic threshold' [128]; establishing itself as an organising principle of thought and source of paradigms across multiple fields of research. Our capacity to theorise a positive conception of biopower is therefore of paramount importance not only for political theory and practice but also for the fields of bioethics, sociology, and the life sciences amongst many others. Despite Agamben's tendency toward the reification of exception, and his lack of conceptual differentiation, his apocalyptic diagnosis of biopolitical futurity, should nevertheless be taken seriously by political theorists and practitioners alike. Indeed as I have hopefully demonstrated through my analysis above, in contemporary politics there remains a strong and worrying continuity between the political rationalities and logics of biopolitics and their thanatopolitical negation. Understanding the complex and dynamic intersections of these two notion is, as I have also argued, critical too the development of an affirmative biopolitics as well as an emancipatory philosophy of life.

The first two responses to the antinomical duality of biopower presented here from Roberto Esposito and Giorgio Agamben, though commendable for their awareness and attentiveness to the problems of biopolitics, as well as their contribution to the wider debate, ultimately fail to overcome or disrupt the binary relationship between life and death in politics. Thus although Esposito's concept of the paradigm of immunization, provides a valuable addition to our understanding of the operation of biopower in political modernity. His attempt to submit it as the only paradigm through which the functionary apparatuses and logics of biopower are comprehensible, massively restricts the theoretical scope of his analysis, and leads him to neglect the subtle and manifold ways in which biopolitics and thanatopolitics overlap. Meanwhile although Agamben is perhaps correct in his attempt to disrupt processional time, and therefore disconnect life from the law in force without significance. As Derrida and indeed Arendt have observed the implementation of such a revolutionary form of messianism, ultimately only succeeds in reconstituting the violence of sovereignty.

In contrast to both of these positions Arendt presents us with the concept of natality; a principle which effectively synthesis' biopolitics with the messianic, enabling us to reconcile life with politics, whilst also overcoming the antinomical duality of biopolitics through the introduction of a break in processional time. Thus Arendt is able to provide us with a redemptive and emancipatory hope founded in the freedom implicit in the act of birth. Ultimately for Arendt it is only through political action enacted in the public sphere and rooted in the fact of natality that will cease the deconstruction of individual and prevent the thanatopolitical reduction of life to species existence. As Arendt concluded, 'it is the faculty of action that interferes with this law [of mortality] because it interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life, which in its turn, as we saw, interrupted and interfered with the cycle of the biological life process. The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in

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action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin' [129].

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