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Biopolitics and its paradoxes: an approach to life and politics in R. Esposito

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss some of Esposito's reflections on biopolitics in order to contribute to a better understanding of this matter. In my view, Roberto Esposito's theorization on this subject cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration his view on modern political philosophy, the need to deconstruct the hegemonic immunitary paradigm that negates life in order to protect it, and the persistence of theologico-political apparatuses that separate life in zones of different value. Therefore, Esposito will deconstruct political philosophy and develop a genealogical research on modern biopolitics that has *immunization* as hermeneutic key. Furthermore, theologico-political dispositives like personhood imply a form of violent immunization. Now, if life has to be immunized in order to be preserved, it is also on this ground that a new philosophy of the common can emerge. In this sense, Esposito elaborates a philosophy of the third person or the Impersonal, both within Life and Thought, as a way out from the Immunitarian stance that sacrifices Life to its own preservation. The reach of this proposal will be discussed in the last part of the paper.

1. Philosophical Approach: Deconstructing Modern Political Conceptuality

To begin with what seems to be a paradox, while Roberto Esposito's *oeuvre* is obsessed with rethinking politics from a philosophical standpoint, it implies at the same time a thorough deconstruction of political philosophy¹. According to Esposito, political philosophy has been incapable of thinking politics because of its very form. Trying to educate politics and to elucidate the best political Order it has forgotten to deal with the essence of politics itself: conflict². This is particularly true for Modern Political Philosophy, if we take Hobbes' theory of the *Commonwealth* as its starting point. Since then, hegemonic political philosophy has made conflict functional to the creation of the sovereign state which, monopolizing violence, has transformed the diffuse fear of the state of nature into the "secure" fear of the *Leviathan* and its sovereign power over life. From then on, the main concern for the state and for political theory will be the protection of life, its conservation,

¹ See R. Esposito, *Categorie dell'impolitico*, Bologna 1999; Id., *Dieci Pensieri sulla politica*, Bologna 2010.

² *Ibid.*

through a series of immunitarian measures that, in order to avoid violence between human beings, will separate them radically. In fact, immunization will be the key notion in Esposito's theory in order to understand the specific traits of modernity and also to understand community and biopolitics.

2. Immunization: from community to biopolitics

Also immunization is inherently paradoxical, since in order to obtain its expected outcome (the protection of life) it must use indirect and counterintuitive means (the negation of life). In order to understand how the immunization paradigm works in Esposito's theory, we must first delve shortly into the tension between *communitas* and *immunitas*³.

Esposito constructs this ontological tension through a specific use of etymology. *Communitas* and *immunitas* are modes of relating to the *munus*, which has different meaning: *onus*, *officium*, and *donum* (an obligation, a public responsibility, a post, and, the third, a gift). Esposito maintains that, paradoxically, this gift can be seen as mandatory, a gift that one cannot keep for oneself. That will be the prevalent meaning he attributes to *munus*. Human beings share originally this obligation to give not only certain objects—as in the rites of the *Kula* or the *potlatch*—but also their selves, to expose one another in common. Understood in these ontological terms, the community is not a transcendent entity, nor an addition of individuals, it does not exist outside this relationship of *munus*, it is nothing positive, only a concave space, expression of a common lack of (id)entity. *Communitas*, formed by *cum* and *munus*, implies a positive relation to the *munus*, a sharing of this *munus*. *Immunitas*, on the contrary, denotes an exemption from it. For Esposito, this ontological tension is always present in society but it changes historically. However, at the same time, *communitas* appears as an originary relationship since we come to being in common, exposed one another, together, *with* each other⁴. What is specific about modernity is that *communitas* cannot be thought and experienced without immunitary

³ See R. Esposito, *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità*, Torino 2006; Id., *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*, Torino 2002.

⁴ As we know, this ontological priority of the *cum*, the *with*, has been elaborated thoroughly by Jean-Luc Nancy, to whom Esposito's reflections on the common are partly indebted. Differently from Blanchot's ethical view on the community which is closer to Lévinas, Nancy and Esposito's ontological reflections find their first source in Heidegger's analysis of *Mitsein* in *Sein und Zeit* and the inconsistencies that left the path open to deepen these investigations. However, the three authors share a special interest in Bataille's reflection on the community as an experience of radical exposure, of *ecstasy*, in which the subject risks its own subjectivity and its own life. See especially Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, Paris 1999; Id., *Etre singulier pluriel*, Paris 1996; M. Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable*, Paris 1983. This debate between Nancy and Blanchot is analyzed in B. Moroncini, *La comunità e l'invenzione*, Napoli 2001; Id., *La comunità impossibile*, in B. Moroncini, F. C. Papparo, G. Borrello, *L'inequale umanità. Comunità, esperienza, differenza sessuale*, Napoli 1991; R. Bernasconi, *On Deconstructing Nostalgia for Community within the West: The Debate between Nancy and Blanchot*, in «Research in Phenomenology», 23, 1993. I have dedicated my unpublished doctoral thesis to this problem: *Re-trait de la co-*

strategies to protect life. In this sense, to the originary void of the *communitas*, Western Modernity responds with a more profound void, separating the bodies, vetoing their contamination, in short: sacrificing life in common to its conservation. From then on, despite the different attempts to rethink the void of the *communitas*⁵, modern immunitarian logic will prevail and politics as such will be excluded from the public domain of representation, reappearing as an unrepresentable practice in those contractual, juridical terms.

Now, the specificity of Esposito's theory on community resides not only its decidedly philosophical-political view that puts human conflictive reality at stake but also in the introduction of the biological dimension⁶. What has to be immunized from the threats of contagion in order to be preserved is life itself. What first was born as an ontological reflection on our originary relationality beyond intersubjectivity based on Heidegger and Bataille leads soon to an analysis of modern biopolitics grounded in the archeological and genealogical approach of Foucault. In both cases, it's all about immunization.

3. Life and politics: biopolitics and immunization

According to Roberto Esposito, life and politics are two domains that cannot be thought separately, since they are completely intertwined. However, their relationship acquires different forms and meanings throughout history. In this sense, since his extremely stimulating book *Immunitas* that dedicates a chapter to *Biopolitics*, Esposito follows to a great extent Foucault's genealogical approach on the matter⁷. Following a

unidad: el pensamiento impolítico de lo común en Nancy, Agamben y Esposito, Napoli 2011.

⁵ Esposito analyzes the attempts made by Rousseau, Kant, and especially Heidegger and Bataille.

⁶ Which is absent in Nancy's approach. Esposito stresses how to the dimension of the *cum*, already present in Nancy, he adds the conflictive, biological and juridical-political dimension of the *munus*, which leads naturally to a study of biopolitics. In this sense, Esposito maintains: «proprio il discorso sul *munus*, la ricerca genealogica ed etimologica sul suo significato, determinando il passaggio all'analisi dell'*immunitas*, mi ha poi reso possibile l'ulteriore transito concettuale alla biopolitica. Questo movimento dalla *communitas* alla biopolitica non poteva essere, e infatti non è stato, effettuato da Nancy perché egli, non tematizzando direttamente il *munus*, non incontra il commutatore semantico dell'*immunitas*». R. Esposito, *Il munus da cui non siamo esonerati: pensare il comune nell'ambito del bíos*. Intervista di Matías Saidel, in Id. *Dall'impolitico all'impersonale: conversazioni filosofiche*, A cura di Matías L. Saidel e Gonzalo Velasco Arias, Introduzione di M. L. Saidel, Milano 2012, p. 52.

⁷ This approach was not yet developed in his first books. In the *Prefazione* of *Categorie dell'impolitico* Esposito stresses the importance of *Begriffsgeschichte* as a step forward in comparison with the history of ideas. However, the impolitical adds to this conscience of the historicity of political concepts a deconstructive approach that tries to turn the notions around and de-termines them in order to think their unthought elements. Later, Esposito develops a genealogical approach inspired by Foucault's and Nietzsche's critique of the metaphysical and immaculate *origin* of institutions. Maybe these different influences (*Be-*

genealogical approach, life cannot be considered a natural substratum for human action. Rather, it is a historical production of a complex of power and knowledge apparatuses that comprehend practice and discourse. At the same time, the meaning *life* and its regimes of visibility and enunciability change historically. Life did not mean the same for the ancients and for Cuvier or Darwin. And, of course, life doesn't mean the same for us. However, in Esposito's approach, every genealogy seems to reveal retroactively an ontological truth: for instance, while the politicization of life that took place in the last century was made possible by the knowledge-power complex that emerged during the 19th century, it also made visible that a bond between life and politics, the political decision on which lives should be protected and developed and which should be interrupted, was at stake in every civilization⁸.

Indeed, Esposito maintains that even for the Ancients politics was a means to protect life from the dangers that surround it. But while the Greeks understood that the political life (*bios politikos*) of free subjects in the polis had to be completely severed from the needs of the vegetative or animal life (*zoé*) that were the concern of *oikonomía*, in modern times the needs of *natural* and later *biological life* become the main concern for politics. While for the Greeks the main task of politics was to make possible *eudaimonia* within a self-sufficient *polis*, being the *polis* a space for *speech* and *action* — in Arendt's terms —⁹, from Hobbes onwards the task of politics becomes the protection of the individual's life, its body, from the risk of violent death,¹⁰ which in turn changes the task and nature of politics itself. But this is not all. According to Esposito, the main difference that separates us from the Greeks in this matter is that we are completely immersed into immunization: a twisted, dialectical logic by which what must be prevented (death, disease, etc.) becomes the means of protection. Speaking of Hobbes Esposito argues:

once the centrality of life is established, it is precisely politics that is awarded the responsibility for saving life, but—and here is the decisive point in the structure of the immunitary paradigm—it occurs through an antinomic *dispositif* that proceeds via the activation of its contrary. In order to be saved, life has to give up something that is integral to itself, what in fact constitutes its principal vector and its own power to expand; namely, the acquisitive desire for everything that places itself in the path of a deadly reprisal¹¹.

griffsgeschichte, Deconstruction, Archeology and Genealogy) explain the importance Esposito attributes to etymological analysis and the evolution of concepts to analyze power.

⁸ Agamben would state that every political regime decides about its *homines sacri*. However, in Esposito the definition of life's worth does not lead necessarily to thanatological results.

⁹ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1958.

¹⁰ As we know, Hannah Arendt denounces in this emergence of the social by the confusion between the space of need and that of liberty, economics and politics, the source of modern depoliticization that arrives at its apex with totalitarianism. See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *cit.*, and *Id.*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York 1966. Following this approach, we might ask if nowadays the juridical protection of private property by sovereign states hasn't outplacéd the protection of life as its primary task.

¹¹ R. Esposito, *Bíos. Biopolitics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis 2008, p. 59.

Esposito explains that immunity was not unknown before modern times, but only then there is a leap from natural to acquired immunity in which the degree and means of immunization becomes a strategic decision. Now, if in first modernity this immunitary logic was still filtered by a set of conceptual mediations (sovereignty, liberty, property, etc.) in the 20th century we assist to a complete juxtaposition between politics and life that modifies the ontological status of both. According to Esposito:

it's indisputable that a general shift of field, logic, and the object of politics has taken place. At the moment in which on one side the modern distinctions between public and private, state and society, local and global collapse, and on the other that all other sources of legitimacy dry up, life becomes encamped in the center of every political procedure. No other politics is conceivable other than a politics of life, in the objective and subjective sense of the term¹².

With the introduction of immunization paradigm as hermeneutic key, Esposito's ontological genealogy intends to contribute to Foucault's ontology of the present¹³. This genealogy is ontological and not anthropological since it does not try to uncover the nature of human beings but rather the historicity of this "nature", the different forms humanness acquires historically through a series of knowledge and power apparatuses. The historical character of this ontology makes him depart from some of Agamben's uses of archeology. Indeed, in the first volumes of *Homo Sacer* Agamben theorizes continuity in the relationship of exception between *bios* and *zoé* from Antiquity to Modernity. This continuity implies the oblivion of the gap between the ancient and the modern notion of life. In fact, as Foucault would say, life as we understand it did not exist then¹⁴. Accordingly, from an archeological and genealogical point of view, one should be cautious with the relationship between life and politics for the Ancients and Moderns (and Postmoderns).

On the one hand, Esposito acknowledges that the biological notion of life and its historicity —from which a biopolitical reality can emerge — appeared in the 19th century, especially with Darwin. So *bios* and *zoé* — useful as they may be to understand the Ancient Greek's conception of life¹⁵ — cannot

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹³ M. Foucault, *Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?*, in «Magazine Littéraire», 309, 1993. We could say the same thing about an important group of thinkers, especially Italian, who have discussed the possible senses of biopolitics following Foucault's trace in the last two decades. To name a few, we could recall Agamben, Negri, Lazzarato, Bazzicalupo, Mezzadra, Marzocca, Fumagalli, Tarizzo, etc.

¹⁴ «Historians want to write histories of biology in the eighteenth century; but they do not realize that biology did not exist then, and that the pattern of knowledge that has been familiar to us for a hundred and fifty years is not valid for a previous period. And that, if biology was unknown, there was a very simple reason for it: that life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by natural history.» (pp. 126-27) For an analysis of this birth of Life see D. Tarizzo, *La vita. Un'invenzione recente*, Roma-Bari 2010.

¹⁵ We should mention that not every scholar is convinced that this distinction recovered from Aristotle by Arendt and later Agamben was so clear for the Greeks themselves.

be considered trans-historical entities as Agamben seems to do. Where Esposito is closer to Agamben is in his analysis of the way in which these power apparatuses work. For Agamben, they operate through separation (exception) and capture (through a kind of disjunctive synthesis) in what he calls 'bipolar machines'. For Esposito, this is the way theologico-political apparatus — like the dispositive of personhood — operate, separating what it declares to unify and unifying what it divides through the subjugation of one part to the domination of the other¹⁶. Of course, this apparatuses continue to work. However, in modern times they are subsumed to immunity that works through a preventive incorporation of the negative. In this sense, both authors situate in 19th century knowledge over life a separation between a relational life and a merely organic life that enables the construction of grades of humanity and the domination of one form of life over the others¹⁷.

On the other hand, in order to stress the unnatural and historically produced character of life and complete Foucault's approach, Esposito tries to put at stake the role of Technology (*tecnica*) not only in postmodern times but also as having an originary relation with life and politics. Technology is not merely a prosthetic recourse that the human animal has to use in order to supplement its lack of specialized instincts. It has a constitutive role in the emergence of humanness as such¹⁸. And this is precisely the reason why one cannot think of an immediate relationship between a given, "natural life" and politics:

what, assuming it is even conceivable, is an absolutely natural life? It's even more the case today, when the human body appears to be increasingly challenged and also literally traversed by technology [*tecnica*]. Politics penetrates directly in life and life becomes other from itself. Thus, if a natural life doesn't exist that isn't at the same time technologic as well; if the relation between *bios* and *zoe* needs by now (or has always needed) to include in it a third correlated term, *techné*—then how do we hypothesize an exclusive relation between politics and life?¹⁹

As we can see, following Foucault's approach, Esposito will depart from any kind of naturalism or metaphysical continuity in thinking life and politics. However, Esposito's reflections on biopolitics in *Bíos* will try, on the one hand, to expand Foucault's analysis, taking into consideration other sources of biopolitics that precede the use of the term by Foucault

¹⁶ R. Esposito, *Due. La macchina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero*, Torino 2013, p. 5.

¹⁷ For instance, both analyze Bichat's notions of animal life and vegetative life and the fact that the latter continues beyond the end of the former. See R. Esposito, *Terza persona. Politica della vita e filosofia dell'impersonale*, Torino 2007; G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*, Torino 1995; Id. *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale*, Torino 2002.

¹⁸ This is one point of departure from Foucault. According to Esposito, although the French was the one who better identified the way in which human bodies are traversed by biopolitical dispositives, Foucault's view on the body seems to be outdated, understanding it as a closed entity. On the contrary, Esposito will follow Donna Haraway in thinking the body as open to the possibility of its technical transformation. Implantation, transplantation, etc. will be figures of a possible new philosophy of immunity that bears in mind the originary relationship between human life and technology.

¹⁹ R. Esposito, *Bíos*, cit., p. 15.

and also analyzing the intellectual roots of Nazi genocide, and, on the other hand, to overcome what he perceives as paradoxes or even contradictions in Foucault's explanation, especially in the last chapter of *La volonté de savoir* (1976) and his seminar *Il faut défendre la société* (1976).

According to Esposito, Foucault hesitates between different approaches on the sense of biopolitics, its temporality and so the very relation between life and politics. At times, life seems to be subjugated to politics. At others, politics seem to respond to the necessities of life. What is at stake is the *sense* of biopolitics: is it a politics of life or a politics over life? Which in turn is connected to the relationship between *biopolitics and sovereign power*: does biopolitics imply the death of sovereignty or is it complementary? Also at stake is the *temporality* of biopolitics: is it an originary reality that emerges with Greek thought and politics or is it a kind of power that arises in modernity? In Esposito's own words:

Does biopolitics precede, follow, or coincide temporally with modernity? Does it have a historical, epochal, or originary dimension? Foucault's response to such a question is not completely clear, a question that is decisive because it is logically connected to the interpretation of contemporary experience. He oscillates between a continuist attitude and another that is more inclined to mark differential thresholds²⁰.

According to Esposito, it is not clear in Foucault whether life posits a limit to politics or if politics blocks the innovative potentialities of life. This uncertainty is linked to an unresolved relationship between sovereign power and biopolitics²¹. From Foucault analysis we can deduce a politics of life or a politics over life, a modern or postmodern reality, juxtaposition or opposition.

The same goes for the relationship between modernity and totalitarianism. If we accept a kind of indistinction between sovereignty, biopolitics and totalitarianism, genocide becomes an almost inevitable outcome of modernity. If difference prevails, how can we explain the presence of an astonishing power of death within the circle of biopolitics which goal is to improve and increase life? Is there a phantasmatic return of sovereignty into the biopolitical horizon or is it that the disappearance of sovereign

²⁰ R. Esposito, *Bíos*, cit., p. 8. However, an approach to immunitary logic is not absent in Foucault, when he develops the logic of variolization and vaccination as mechanisms of security supported by a statistical apparatus of probabilities similar to the logic of scarcity. M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977-78*, Basingstoke 2007, pp. 85ss.

²¹ «Just as the sovereign model incorporates the ancient pastoral power [...] so too biopolitics carries within it the sharp blade of sovereign power that both crosses and surpasses it. If we consider the Nazi state, we can say indifferently, as Foucault himself docs, that it was the old sovereign power that adopts biological racism for itself... Or, on the contrary, that it is the new biopolitical power that made use of the sovereign right of death in order to give life to state racism. If we have recourse to the first interpretive model, biopolitics becomes an internal articulation of sovereignty; if we privilege *the* second, sovereignty is reduced to a formal schema of biopolitics». R. Esposito, *Bíos*, cit., p. 41.

paradigm unraveled a vital force that turned against itself? According to Esposito, Foucault's analysis does not make a choice between one of these possibilities, leaving all of them open. In a way, these ambiguities have enabled the development of so many different interpretations on biopolitics. On the one hand, that of Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, where genocide becomes a natural result of biopolitics, since sovereignty itself—as a power of exception over life that includes the *zoé* by excluding it—is always already biopolitical. On the other hand, that of Hardt and Negri²², that clearly separate biopolitics from biopower, the immanent creative potential of life within the multitude from the capture made by dispositives of control of postmodern sovereignty, enabling a euphoric view of biopolitics. These ambiguities also enabled the rejection of biopolitics as a very broad term that must be subordinated to the exploitation of human potentialities to produce, that Marxism calls labor force²³ or the need to expand and actualize Foucault's concept of biopolitics through the analysis of new forms of remote control of the brain's attention and memory that Lazzarato calls noopolitics²⁴. No wonder, then, that a philosopher like Esposito, whose work on political concepts has been always very deep and complex, will try to understand the source of these ambiguities and to overcome them through conceptual clarification.

Indeed, for Esposito, these semantic ambiguities are not surprising if we take a closer look to Foucault's conceptualization. Esposito maintains that even though Foucault has thought power more thoroughly than anyone else, he has not articulated a proper concept of *politics*, juxtaposing the notions of *biopower* and *biopolitics*. The same goes for the notion of *life*, of which the epistemological status must be determined and also if there is something like a naked life (*nuda vita*). Not to mention that, in Esposito's view, life and politics seem to be articulated extrinsically by Foucault, as if both were two realities that meet each other at a certain point.

All these contradictions and paradoxes would be articulated if not resolved by the immunization paradigm. Esposito announces it explicitly:

My thesis is that this kind of an epistemological uncertainty is attributable to the failure to use a more ductile paradigm, one that is capable of articulating in a more intrinsic manner the two lemmas that are enclosed in the concept in question, which I have for some time now referred to in terms of immunization. [...] the element that quickly needs to be established is the peculiar knot that immunization posits between biopolitics and modernity [...] only when biopolitics is linked conceptually to the immunitary dynamic of the negative protection of life does biopolitics reveal its specifically modern genesis²⁵.

²² M. Hardt & A. Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, Massachusetts 2000; Id. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York 2004; Id. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts 2009.

²³ P. Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Cambridge Massachusetts 2003; Id. *Multitude between Innovation and Negation*, Los Angeles 2008.

²⁴ M. Lazzarato, *La Politica dell'evento*, Soveria Mannelli 2004.

²⁵ R. Esposito, *Bíos*, cit., pp. 8-9.

One should keep in mind that, first, the two main forms and senses of immunity are juridical and biological, so that the different dimensions implied in biopolitics find a natural home in immunitary praxis and thought. Secondly, the homeopathic and dialectical way in which immunity works, i.e., protecting life through its negation, introducing portions of death into life in order to protect it. Thirdly, if life's preservation is the goal of immunity, it also helps understand the specificity of modern biopolitics, since «only modernity makes of individual self-preservation the presupposition of all other political categories, from sovereignty to liberty»²⁶. Fourthly, immunity paradigm enables to think the articulation of life and politics intrinsically, within and through the bodies. As we can see, immunity presupposes an intrinsic relationship between life and politics, since immunity does not link life with power: «immunity is the *power to preserve life*»²⁷. Esposito maintains that there is no power outside life nor life outside power: politics is the instrument to keep life alive²⁸. Therefore, affirmative and negative biopolitics are part of the same process since negation is the way in which life is preserved through power.

In this sense, even though Esposito analyzes carefully the conditions of possibility of nazi genocide, he understands this thanatological outcome as only one of the possibilities of our era. Rather than thinking thanatopolitics as an ontologically predetermined result or as an unexplainable enigma, it emerges when biopolitics coincides with exacerbated forms of nationalism and racism, in which the existence of other nations and races is considered as an obstacle for the expansion and purity of the own race and also when a political body reaches a degree of immunization in which the immunitary system ends up attacking the body it should protect, like in autoimmune diseases. That's why Nazism differs a lot from communism and from modernity as such. And that is why the biopolitical paradigm enables Esposito to criticize the notion of totalitarianism. Whereas communism was based in modern philosophy of history, Nazism was not based in philosophy but in biology, introducing a cut with respect to modern biopolitics²⁹. According to Esposito, only Nazism introduced a kind of thanatopolitical dialectics which linked the potentiation of life to an ever greater consummation of death. Only with Nazism politics are completely biologized, instituting medicalized

²⁶ *Ivi.*, p. 9.

²⁷ *Ivi.*, p. 46, our italics.

²⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹ It is interesting to notice that in Esposito's account, since Nazism had as its transcendental object and subject biological life, it comes after modernity and its philosophies of history. He also maintains that the era of biopolitics implies the end of language as the transcendental of thought. R. Esposito, *Pensiero Vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*, Torino 2010. However, Foucault pointed out that Life was a semi-transcendental of modernity, together with Work and Language. See M. Foucault, *The order of things*, London / New York 1989.

murder to regenerate society. And that is what makes of Nazism still our problem, since medicalization and biologization are still ongoing processes³⁰.

Another related point that Esposito will analyze is the centrality of the human body in modern politics. If politics now takes biological life as its object it is only in the dimension of the body that political immunization can work to preserve it. This is another point in which the Italian wants to expand Foucault's works and go beyond them. For the latter, the body is the place that both disciplinary anatomopolitics and biopower intervene. In the first case, we have an individualizing, normalizing technology. In the second, a totalizing, regulatory one, that takes the body of the population as a reference. Both make part of what later Foucault will call governmentality. However, Esposito criticizes Foucault's conception of the body: the French understands it as a closed functional unity while Esposito will draw on Donna Haraway and Jean-Luc Nancy, who make visible that the body is an open construct traversed by technology³¹.

In Esposito's theory this has not only ontological but also ethico-political implications. In *Bíos*, Esposito explains for instance how Nazism tried to enclose the body into itself and predetermine the political destiny of every birth through belonging to a race³². In *Immunitas*, analyzing figures such as implantation, transplantation, artificial insemination, or even pregnancy, Esposito starts to develop a new philosophy of immunity that will later be formulated as 'affirmative biopolitics'. There he theorizes a *common immunity*, i.e., a form of immunization that has objectively communitarian outcomes. Pregnancy is particularly relevant since in this case it is difference, and not identity, which allows the coexistence between the fetus and the mother. This metaphor enables to think conflict

³⁰ Even though it is true that these processes are still ongoing, we can also affirm that their form and goals have changed radically within neoliberal governmentality, giving birth to forms of biovalue and biocapital. There are selections today, but they have to do less with race than with wealth, less with the problem of degeneration and more with that of competition within the market and increase of human capital. As Foucault has shown, from Ordoliberalism to Chicago School style neoliberalism, the negative referent is the Totalitarian state, especially Nazism. Accordingly, even though liberal eugenics are made possible by state regulations and investments, the ultimate agent of decision becomes the individual who is in a position to make ethopolitical decisions. See M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, Basingstoke 2008; Th. Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*. New York 2011; Id., *Perspectives on Genetic Discrimination*, New York 2013; K. S. Rajan, *Lively Capital: Biotechnologies, Ethics, and Governance in Global Markets*. Durham 2012; Id. *Biocapital: The Constitution of Postgenomic Life*. Durham 2006; N. Rose. *Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-first Century*. Princeton 2007.

³¹ It must be stressed that Foucault problematizes the relationship between intervention in the genetic equipment of descendants and human capital, beyond the discussion of racism. See *Birth of Biopolitics*, cit., p. 229ss.

³² This coincidence between the body and ourselves that Lévinas criticized is not far from what Esposito will develop in *Third Person* and Jean-Luc Nancy throughout his work: the idea that we don't have a body as Christian and liberal philosophy think; rather, we are bodies.

and difference —and not identity— as the condition of possibility of life's development and coexistence³³.

No wonder that the second step in thinking affirmative biopolitics will take place in *Bíos*, in an attempt to turn Nazi power dispositives against themselves. In a gesture he will repeat time and again, he will seek a way out in a reading of 20th century French philosophy. Esposito characterizes Nazi dispositives as the absolute normativization of life, the double enclosure of the body, and the anticipatory suppression of life, inhibiting life in its very inception. Therefore, he will recover Canguilhem's notion of a life that norms itself, Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh (*chair*) and Simondon's idea of birth as an always renewed process of individuation³⁴.

To sum up, Esposito's main concern in *Bíos* will be to penetrate 'the black box of biopolitics', resolve what appears as enigmatic contradictions, uncover the conditions of possibility of its thanatological outcome and think the possibility of affirmative biopolitics. This effort will be continued by other means in *Third Person* (2007).

4.1. The deadlock of personhood

If in *Bios* Esposito analyzes, among other things, the intellectual and practical sources of Nazi genocide, in his following book, *Terza Persona*, he will deconstruct the answer that followed that experience, i.e., the philosophical and juridical consensus around the need of personhood in order to become subject of rights, reflected in the declaration of human rights of 1948. In order to avoid the repetition of these experiences, the answer these Conventions offered was to enhance the range of personhood. If rights belong to *persons* and only to them, and if the *person* cannot be submitted to death, torture or degrading treatments with impunity, it is a logical step to try to expand the coverage of this criterion, giving the status of *person* to more and more living beings. However, Esposito maintains that personhood cannot avoid the destruction of life since it is this very *dispositif* that enables the separation of life in zones of different worth. The *dispositif* of personhood is based in the presupposed separation between the *person* as an artificial entity and *homo*, i.e.: the «human as a natural being, whom the status of person may or may not befit»³⁵.

For Esposito, personhood is the condition of possibility of the depersonalization that Arendt described analyzing totalitarianism and the production of industrialized death³⁶. In order to fill the gap between man and

³³ R. Esposito, *Immunitas: protezione e negazione della vita*, Torino 2002, pp. 198ss.

³⁴ See R. Esposito, *Bíos*, cit., Ch. 4 and 5.

³⁵ R. Esposito, *Third Person. Politics of life and philosophy of the impersonal*, Translated by Zakiya Hanafi, Cambridge 2012, p. 9.

³⁶ This critique of depersonalization and of the unenforceability of human rights that H. Arendt proposes in *The origins of totalitarianism* are also developed by G. Agamben, mainly in *Homo Sacer I*. Also many references to the Impersonal can be found in Agamben. I have developed an analysis of this issue in *Más allá de la persona: lo impersonal en el pens-*

citizen that was opened after World War I and lead to the unenforceability of human rights, the answer was to separate personhood from citizenship: even individuals who have no citizenship should be subject to human rights' protection. In Esposito's words, «the category of person appears to be the only one that can unite human beings and citizens, body and soul, law and life».³⁷ However, his thesis is that «the essential failure of human rights, their inability to restore the broken connection between rights and life, does not take place in spite of the affirmation of the ideology of the person but rather *because* of it».³⁸

In *Terza Persona*, Esposito develops his argument in three parts, deconstructing archeologically and genealogically the theological-political dispositive of personhood and offering in the last part a glimpse of a philosophy of the third person. The first two will be commented immediately and the third part will be analyzed later.

The first chapter of the book is devoted to the 19th century apparatus of human sciences [la macchina delle scienze umane]³⁹ in which the dualistic separation of higher and lower parts/forms of life is established as a scientific fact in different branches of knowledge. Esposito analyzes the role of human sciences as linguistics and anthropology in the general biologization of politics. The idea of a «double biological layer within every living being — one vegetative and unconscious, and the other cerebral and relational — [...] initiated a process of desubjectivization, which was destined to drastically change the framework of the modern concept of the political»⁴⁰. If our will and passions are determined by the blind force of vegetative life, it means that we cannot rule ourselves. Therefore, the political order cannot be considered as a product of our will. It depends on a biological fact that precedes our subjectivity and cannot be modified. When these kinds of theorizations are transferred from the individual to the human species, it will appear as divided between zones of different value: some human beings will be considered to be closer to animality than to the status of personhood, in a process of depersonalization that arrived at its apex in the concentration camps.

The second chapter will show that, at least since Roman Law, the juridical and theologico-political institution of personhood presupposes that other human beings, who are not persons, are treated as things and that even those who get the status of person must traverse, and can remain in, the status of thing. This separation between *persona* and *homo* penetrates in modern juridical, philosophical and political thought. For instance, these depersonalizing effects reappear in contemporary liberal bioethics,

amiento de Roberto Esposito y Giorgio Agamben, in «Eikasía. Revista de filosofía», 51, 9/2013.

³⁷ R. Esposito, *Third Person*, cit., p. 4.

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 69.

³⁹ This notion and theoretical development is close to Agamben's notion of anthropological machine [macchina antropologica] developed mainly in *The Open (L'aperto)*, cit.).

⁴⁰ *Third Person*, cit., p. 6.

deepening the breach between *homo* and *persona*, biological life and personal life. Taking «reason, will, moral» as «indicators of humanhood», Singer and Engelhardt distinguish between proper persons (adult and 'healthy' individuals) and mere members of the species *homo sapiens*. In the middle lie different degrees of personhood like the quasi-person, the semi-person, the anti-person, etc.⁴¹. My thesis is that these kind of divisions can help understand not only the kind of exclusions sovereign Law and medical discourse make but also the way the market produces *superfluous subjects* in the neoliberal era.

4.2. The Neoliberal Person and the Sovereignty of Debt

As Timothy Campbell suggests, a reading of Neoliberalism through the thanatological dispositif of personhood is not only possible but also necessary. Campbell maintains that Neoliberalism produces a process of personalization, which, as we have already seen, implies depersonalization of other people or even parts of the self. Of special interest in Campbell's comment is the possibility to connect the dispositif of the person to the discourse of human capital, which he links to the theological notion of the Grace —the Kharisma— of personhood.⁴² In fact, in the neoliberal era, the quantity and quality of human capital becomes the measure of our personal value. Decisions that increase our human capital will mean more freedom while a poor amount of this capital condemns the subject to forms of servitude that push it to the margins of personhood, i.e., to slavery and thingness. Indeed, Esposito notes that liberals share with Nazism the incorporation of the body as a thing. Both share a productivist conception of the body. However, whereas the Nazis subordinated the interventions on the body in search for the purity of the race and to the property of the State, in the liberal conception,

the separation that the *dispositif* of the person institutes between person and what belongs improperly to the body is what allows an individual to incorporate the body as living object in order to donate organs for instance, or to oversee and manage the body as human capital; all in the name of an expansion of individual liberty premised on the possibility of administering forms of thingness on the living being that prosthetically connects to a proper, personal identity⁴³.

Hence, the body becomes a kind of «reserve of human capital»⁴⁴ for the person —this spiritual and juridical entity— that owns and governs it.

⁴¹ R. Esposito, *Third Person*, cit., p. 97.

⁴² This notion of *kharis* is central to Agamben's notion of messianic community. In fact, he opposes the gratuitousness of grace, that interrupts social exchanges, to the mixture of obligation and donation of the Gift. See G. Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Stanford, CA 2005, pp. 123-24.

⁴³ T. Campbell, "Enough of a Self": *Esposito's Impersonal Biopolitics*, «Law, Culture and the Humanities», 8, 2012, p. 41.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 39.

In the neoliberal era, the subject must be ready to become a person when the market calls him, even if it implies putting on hold his own animality and using pharmaceuticals to keep the pace, selling genetic material, etc.⁴⁵ Campbell maintains that it isn't simply that individuals move across these thresholds of personhood «on their own as neo-liberalism would have it, but rather that many are pushed to do so by the demands of the market»⁴⁶.

Esposito doesn't ignore the thanatological consequences of neoliberal dispositives. In *Due* (2013) he devotes a few pages to the problems posed by property, capitalism and sovereign debt and returns to the analysis of liberal bioethics initiated in *Terza Persona*⁴⁷. For instance, he shows how the already commented liberal-utilitarian bioethicists Singer and Engelhardt justify the suppression of 'defective' or 'handicapped' sons that could take the place of 'normal' ones, rising the costs in suffering and efforts of his parents (and society)⁴⁸. In my view, such assertions coincide with the valorization of our *genetic human capital*⁴⁹. In neoliberal society, those who cannot develop their human capital and hence their employability, those who do not adapt to the requirements of market economy — willingness to compete, self-entrepreneurship, flexibility, etc. —, are condemned to a lower degree of personhood: less property, less freedom, less rights, less humanness.

The roots of this depersonalization and submission of the body to the requirements of property can be traced back to Roman theology and law that link body and property to the point that the individual who doesn't own things cannot be a person⁵⁰. In this sense, through the institution of *nexum*, the body of the debtor that could not pay his debts could take the place of his property, losing his personal freedom together with his corporal one⁵¹.

These reflections are a continuation of those developed in *Third Person*. There Esposito recovers Weil's polemic against Roman law. Weil considered that rights are always a kind of privilege, something commercial that must be backed by violence. Therefore, personhood implies the subordination of some human beings to others, the 'thingnification' of human beings.

⁴⁵ Campbell comments at this point Joao Biehl's analysis of the options that are open to people with AIDS, the medicalization of behavior with the use of antidepressants in order to act as a person, the selling of genetic material in Singapore, etc. *Ivi*, p. 42ss.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* This obligation to be free to compete, that neoliberalism institutes as a form of government and subjection, is studied deeply in P. Dardot & Ch. Laval, *La nouvelle raison du monde: essai sur la société néolibérale*, Paris 2009.

⁴⁷ Esposito maintains that the absence of a deeper theorization on this matter is due to his lack of knowledge on the economic doctrines in comparison to the political ones. See "*Due. La macchina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero*": *riflessioni sotto forma di dialogo su filosofia, teologia, economia*. Intervista a Roberto Esposito a cura di Antonio Lucci, «Lo sguardo», 13, 2013, pp. 299-302.

⁴⁸ R. Esposito, *Due*, cit., pp. 142-148.

⁴⁹ Although, as we mentioned earlier, Foucault mentions this idea, he focuses on the educational and affective aspects of the growth of human capital. See M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978-79*, Basingstoke 2008, pp. 229ss.

⁵⁰ R. Esposito, *Due*, cit., p. 152.

⁵¹ R. Esposito, *Due*, cit., p. 149-156. Esposito notes that corporal punishment because of debts was finally abolished in Italy only in 1942 (p. 155).

This kind of subordination and de-vitalization of life helps understand aspects of present day capitalism. For instance, Esposito analyzes the characterization of Deleuze and Guattari of the capitalist machine that assumes the diverse fluxes that traverse social life, reducing their intensity and modifying their scope. Capitalism appears as a double-headed process—one directed to desire and the other to its capture— «that restores the excluding logic of the Two within the globalized world»⁵². Recognizing that political action takes place inside the capitalist machine, critical thought must also try to transform it from within, liberating its affirmative elements.

But the main approach to the problem of economy appears in his excursus on sovereign debt that closes *Due*. There he analyzes the process that took place in the last decades, with the passage *from sovereign debt to the sovereignty of debt* and also from political theology to a kind of economic theology with power of decision over survival. In this sense, the debt has a strategic role, not only in the government of populations in which almost everyone is directly or indirectly indebted but also in the production of a guilty subjectivity⁵³.

Accordingly, Esposito maintains that we are becoming a society of indebted people in which biological life becomes the theological zone of intersection between economy and politics⁵⁴. Not only we are personally indebted in order to pay off our studies, homes and even medical care, but also we are born and die in countries that use the taxes to pay the sovereign debt to global finance in a passage from *welfare* to *debtfare*⁵⁵.

In that context Esposito proposes to turn around the debt in order to connect it with the originary common *munus* that in archaic societies was a means of social cohesion in a collective practice. The absolution from debts should be reactivated in order to pass from sovereign debt to common debt, a community of debt capable of breaking the immunitary chains of the world.⁵⁶ However, his main answer to the theologico-political dispositive of personhood as a whole will be a deployment of a philosophy and a politics of the Impersonal.

5. Towards a politics of the Impersonal

Esposito takes from Simone Weil not only her polemic against Roman law but also the revaluation of the impersonal and the idea that the most

⁵² R. Esposito, *Due*, cit., p. 212.

⁵³ Indeed, as Benjamin explained, capitalism is a religion that produces guilt, and, as Nietzsche showed before him all our Judeo-Christian moral categories derive from bad conscience associated to *Schuld*, i.e., Debt and Guilt. See W. Benjamin, *Kapitalismus als Religion*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VI, Frankfurt 1985, pp. 100-103; F. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Leipzig 1887.

⁵⁴ R. Esposito, *Due*, cit., p. 225.

⁵⁵ Many of these ideas are further developed in M. Lazzarato, *La fabrique de l'homme endetté*, Paris 2011; Id. *Il governo dell'uomo indebitato*, Roma 2013.

⁵⁶ R. Esposito, *Due*, cit., p. 226.

dangerous part in us is precisely that which says 'we'⁵⁷. In my view, Weil's inspiration helps understand how these reflections on the impersonal are connected to the *impolitical* in Esposito, who rather than elaborating an euphoric and vitalist account of impersonality, will search for it in the shadow of the person, deconstructing, turning around this notion rather than simply overcoming it⁵⁸. However, if the *impolitical* held human beings as finite beings, now the stress will be put in our condition of living beings. Also, if the *impolitical* was devoted to a deconstruction of modern subjectivity and transcendence, now Esposito will think the impersonal in a plain of pure immanence⁵⁹. What remains untouched is the Weilian idea that justice does not derive from the law, from subjective rights, but from an originary obligation — the *munus* — towards the others.

In this sense, the third part of *Third Person* will be devoted to an analysis of the Impersonal in 20th century French thought, putting at stake the third person in order to avoid depersonalization, through a deconstruction of the dispositive of personhood. In this sense, the Impersonal is not the negation of the person; it is rather «a shifting border: that critical margin... that separates the semantics of the person from its natural effect of separation»⁶⁰.

In this part of the book Esposito tries to shift towards a more affirmative approach on the Impersonal as «the content of a practice that alters existence»⁶¹. In order to theorize affirmative biopolitics, not only politics but also life must be rethought outside the scientific paradigm which enabled Genocide. Hence the importance of philosophical thought and, in particular, of the notion of 'impersonal life' developed by Gilles Deleuze.

Before commenting on this notion, one important thing to bear in mind is that for Esposito the third person is the only one that can be at the same time singular and plural, escaping the exclusive and sacrificial effects of 'we', which — according to Esposito — expresses a collective I, a principle of sameness and self-identity that is linked to modern immunization⁶². Therefore, the third person helps deconstruct the transcendental subject and the exclusive relationship between Ego and Alter. And this choice has

⁵⁷ Id., *Third Person*, cit., pp. 100-101.

⁵⁸ Weil's deconstruction of both modern subjectivity and modern political concepts has been always tantamount to Esposito's account. In particular, he repeats time and again Weil's dictum: «We can take every term, every expression of our political vocabulary and open them; inside them we will find emptiness [il vuoto]». S. Weil, *Ne recommençons pas la guerre de Troie*, in «Nouveaux Cahiers», nn. 2 & 3, April 1937, cit apud Esposito, *Categorie dell'impolitico*, ch. 4. On the other hand, we should notice that, as a good deconstructive reader, Esposito realizes that personhood cannot be simply overcome.

⁵⁹ The first of these two points is discussed by L. Bazzicalupo, *La politica e le parole dell'impersonale*, in L. Bazzicalupo (ed.) *Impersonale. In dialogo con Roberto Esposito*, Milano – Udine 2008, pp. 57-76. The second one is pointed out by A. Martone, *Il potere e la sua ombra. R. Esposito dall'impolitico all'impersonale*, in L. Bazzicalupo (ed.), *Impersonale*, cit. pp. 93-108.

⁶⁰ R. Esposito, *Third person*, cit., p. 14.

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 17.

⁶² It is at least debatable that the 'we' expresses a collective I. 'We', which can be exclusive or inclusive, is an autonomous linguistic reality. It is not an addition of 'I's.

noteworthy political effects. For instance, Alberto Moreiras maintains that a community of the 'we' implies the choice of a liberty for a few, while the impersonal implies a liberty for all, beyond calculations and teleology: a politics of the singular plural⁶³. This can be exemplified by Blanchot's politics of anonymity, of writing as the neutral regime of the "one", of an action without subject that coincides with the event.

Rather than providing an exegesis of Deleuze, Esposito tries to develop his own theorization borrowing concepts and inspiration from the French. Accordingly, he will use Deleuzian concepts in order to think the Impersonal in the immanent field of life. Esposito maintains that whereas Foucault, like Bichat, «takes death and its utter estrangement as his starting point to arrive at life» Deleuze takes life as immanence, which is a «fold of being onto itself, its declension into becoming»⁶⁴.

Esposito identifies three sources of attack to the person in *Mille Plateaux*, which are related to the notion of life: first, the substitution of possibility with Bergson's *virtuality*; second, the notion of *individuation*, that displaces the horizon from Subject to Life and where the notion of *haecceity* refers to the temporality of the event; third, the notion of *becoming animal* that brings back humankind to its natural alteration and also opens humanity to «plurivocity, metamorphosis, contamination – and preventive critique of any claim to hereditary, ethnic, or racial purity»⁶⁵.

For Esposito, Deleuze subtracts subjectivity from the regime of the individual or the person in order to refer to an immanent world in which individuations are impersonal and singularities are preindividual. Esposito explains that the impersonal is the deployment and extroversion of the person that does not refer to the homogeneity of the undifferentiated but to the mobility of difference⁶⁶.

In this sense, Esposito departs from vitalist readings of Deleuze in order to think a politics of the third person. He recovers this idea of impersonal life mainly from the last text published by Deleuze before his death: *L'immanence, une vie...* in which subjectivity and corporality, substance and modes coincide. This indivisible event of life in the plain of immanence can be referred to the third or living person, coextensive with life, as a

synolon of form and force, external and internal, *bios* and *zoe*. The third person... points to this *unicum*, to this being that is both singular and plural - to the non-person inscribed in the person, to the person open to what has never been before⁶⁷.

As we can see, Esposito finds in Deleuze the possibility to think life in immanent terms, making impossible the isolation of 'lives unworthy of life' [lebensunwertes Lebens] and hence depersonalization. He introduces an

⁶³ A. Moreiras, *La vertigine della vita*, in L. Bazzicalupo, cit., pp. 149-172.

⁶⁴ R. Esposito, *Third Person*, cit., p. 18.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 150.

⁶⁶ R. Esposito, *Due*, cit., p. 215.

⁶⁷ R. Esposito, *Third Person*, cit., p. 151.

original reading of Deleuze—who does not refer to norms—with Canguilhem's norm-of-life, that «opens the norm to the infinite unpredictability of life»⁶⁸, in order to think life's immanent self-normativity. Hence, life needn't be subjugated to the preemptive and external character of a transcendent law. Life has its own normativity. Also, life is not the property of subjects but the expression of an impersonal force that traverses the subject. Furthermore, this impersonal life defies the modern idea of a self-conscious, proprietary and identitary subject. In this sense, it opens a gap in the closed circle of immunization.

As L. Bazzicalupo notes, this juxtaposition of the Impersonal and Life enables Esposito to connect his deconstruction of language with the energetic density, the force and desire implied in the notion of *bios*, at the crossroads of the biopolitical paradigm and the coming politics. In this sense, life is understood as a flux, stream of a-subjective, pre-reflexive and impersonal conscience. The entrance in the plain of immanence would allow searching for affirmativeness outside the symbolic, representation and interdiction. In this plain, every being is worthy. Against the supposed neutrality of the judging third person *super partes*, Esposito searches for a way out in the non-person that, in its singularity, holds its norms and values. However, this impersonal flux can derive in a *Todestrieb* that pushes for dis-individuation and the loss of the self⁶⁹.

A similar concern is expressed by E. Lisicani Petrini, who has also developed her own theorization of the impersonal⁷⁰. First, she points out that immunity should be understood as a kind of interruption of (communitarian) immanence. This is important in order to stress once again the continuity between Esposito's theorization of community and affirmative biopolitics. However, she asks if with absolute immanence we don't lose the *munus*, the negativity inherent to Being, and therefore the other side of the *communitas*. Secondly, she is concerned with the possibility to think the dynamic and affirmative dimension of the pre-individual without returning to a communizing and vivifying One-fundament⁷¹, i.e., without falling back into a metaphysics, in this case materialist and immanentist. Accordingly, Tarizzo notes that these notions are not far from posing the blind force

⁶⁸ R. Esposito, *Bíos*, cit., p. 190.

⁶⁹ L. Bazzicalupo, cit., p. 71.

⁷⁰ E. Lisicani Petrini, *Fuori della persona. L'“impersonale” in Merleau-Ponty, Bergson e Deleuze*, in «Filosofia politica», 3, 2007, pp. 393-409; Id. *Verso il soggetto impersonale*, in «Filosofia Politica», 1, 2012, pp. 39-50.

⁷¹ This critique seems applicable to Paolo Virno's theory that, on the one hand, understand language as a preindividual One-fundament from which a pluralization emerges, giving place to the transindividual multitude. On the other hand, he attempts to find in the pre-individual strata of mirror-neurons the fundamentals of an originary empathy, a biological predisposition to community. In this sense, also J. Revel criticizes the notions of *whatever* [qualunque] (Agamben), *impersonal* and *preindividual* since they posit the common as a given and not as a result of political production and the invention of shared modes of living. See P. Virno, *Grammar of the multitude*, cit.; Id. *Mirror Neurons, Linguistic Negation, and Mutual Recognition*, in «Multitude», cit.; J. Revel, *Identità, natura, vita: tre decostruzioni biopolitiche*, in M. Galzigna (ed.), *Foucault, oggi*, Milano 2008, pp. 134-149.

of Life and its will in the place of Subjectivity, enabling a postmodern metaphysics of Life⁷². A third problem is the relationship between language and its referent. Lisciani Petrini asks if we really grasp what we want to say and if immanence is really thinkable and livable other than with madness (Nietzsche), death or suicide (Deleuze). Finally, she maintains that if the many are held together by a transindividual and impersonal biological fact, far from a more rich and complex form of life, it can unleash the forces of that stratum of drive, risking reproduce the Nazi standpoint of adhering to the laws of nature. In a similar sense, Fimiani warns against the unconscious acceptance of the truths of molecular biology that would be at the basis of deleuzian conception.

Undeniably, these kinds of risks are unavoidable since life itself seems to acquire all the predicates of subjectivity and, also, life became progressively molecular and informational in the last decades⁷³. However, one must remember that at this point we are not dealing with a biological notion of life and that we are far from any form of naturalism. Rather, we are dealing with singular and impersonal events that cannot be attributed to an individuated subject. In this sense, we are closer to the Deleuzian notion of anorganic life, linked to bergsonian virtuality and memory, recently recovered by M. Lazzarato. We are dealing with the *flesh*, with an unorganized body that has opened itself to its other and that doesn't belong to a person or a self-conscious subject; a kind of *flesh* (Merleau-Ponty) that is always becoming other, experiencing unprecedented forms of individuation. Against the dualist structure of the person, this impersonal life cannot be separated from its form.

In this sense, Esposito bets for a politics of the impersonal because it obliges to think politics beyond a political theology based on the person's sovereign decision, rights and its possibility of exclusion. A politics beyond the Hobbesian theatre of representation, that authorizes the *persona* of the sovereign to decide anything he likes without consequences for himself. A politics that approaches the living bodies, their desires and needs. Beyond the subject and the person, this reflection on life as immanent, singular and impersonal opens a gap in the modern immunitarian horizon.

In an analysis of Italian philosophy, Esposito clarifies that from this notion of life, always linked to politics and history, and therefore to corporality and technology, it is possible to think the subject's constitutive nexus with the community⁷⁴, in the productive pulse of life and the common world in its unextinguishable vital potentialities⁷⁵. In this sense, forms of life are understood as impersonal and singular modes of subtraction

⁷² D. Tarizzo, *'Italian Theory': soggetto, moltitudine, popolo*, in «Filosofia politica», 3/2011.

⁷³ A detailed archeological account of these processes can be found in E. Sacchi, *Biopolíticas: del organismo a la información. Aportes para un diagnóstico sobre la biopolítica contemporánea a partir de las transformaciones en el orden saber-poder del siglo XX*, tesis de doctorado, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2013.

⁷⁴ *Ivi.*, pp. 32-33.

⁷⁵ *Ivi.*, p. 251.

to the dialectics of subjectification and subjection. Responding to the concerns about erecting metaphysics of life, he maintains that life is not presupposed to the subjects that incarnate it but the living substance of its infinite singularity⁷⁶. Put otherwise, life is not a subject, it is not will, it is nor presupposition but ex-position.

Nonetheless, Esposito felt the need to rethink the impersonal in the domain of thought, recovering the tradition of immanence that considers thought as a collective experience outside our consciousness. Esposito maintains that if the inherence of *thought* to the individual subject is the epicenter of the theologico-political dispositive of the person, a philosophy of the impersonal must dislocate its place. The tradition that goes from Averroes to Deleuze shares the tendency to the exteriorization of thought with respect to the interiority of consciousness⁷⁷.

According to Esposito, Averroes theory of unity and impersonality of thought, in which thought does not belong to anyone, implies a deconstruction of the theologico-political dispositive of the person, since only the human species in its totality can actualize it⁷⁸. Also in Bruno and Spinoza thought is impersonal, although not separated from the bodily existence. In both cases, they attack the presuppositions of political theology: criticizing the dogma of trinity and incarnation (Bruno) or the God-Person (Spinoza), both reject the dualism between a spiritual and a corporeal substance, subjected to the former⁷⁹. This deconstruction of political theology and personhood continues in Schelling, Nietzsche, Bergson and Deleuze, where the impersonal doesn't oppose to the person or the subject, but overturns them to disable their excluding potentialities.

In any case, it is clear that for Esposito a philosophy of the impersonal has the task to deconstruct both the immunitary paradigm and the theologico-political dispositives that separate life in zones of different value and enable violent exclusions. To do so, he recovers a tradition of immanence, first within the same ground of biopolitics, in a theorization of impersonal life, and later in a deconstruction of political theology in a tradition that places thought outside the immunitary borders of subjectivity and consciousness.

However, one may well ask if this is the most interesting and productive way of dealing with biopolitics and the production of death and exclusions. We may ask if leaving the problem of biopolitics to the 'tribunal of philosophers'⁸⁰ can really help us overcome the deadlocks of the contemporary situation. My point is that in answers such as inverting sovereign debt into the ontological common *munus* or the person into the impersonal we find both the coherence and the limits of Esposito's

⁷⁶ R. Esposito, *Terza Persona*, cit., ch 3; Id., *Pensiero Vivente*, cit., ch. 5.

⁷⁷ R. Esposito, *Due*, cit., p. 11. This path reminds that of Agamben's *On Potentiality and Absolute immanence*, in *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford CA 1999.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 13-14.

⁷⁹ R. Esposito, *Due*, cit., p. 14.

⁸⁰ P. E. Rodríguez, *La biopolítica bajo el prisma del "dispositivo filosófico"*, «Papeles de trabajo», 2/2007.

approach. Although his categories help us diagnose and theorize a way out of the present situation, he seems to imply that changing the way we look at things and conceptualize them would be enough to produce a real change. No wonder he looks for answers in the philosophical tradition and proposes very abstract concepts to respond to very concrete problems. We will say a few words in the conclusion.

Concluding remarks

In the previous sections we commented in which ways Esposito analyzes different notions of life, its relation to politics and its paradoxes.

First, in a foucauldian vein, he stresses the intrinsic relationship between life and politics and that the meaning of life, its ontological and epistemic status, changes historically. Hence the impossibility to think biopolitics before modernity.

Secondly, we commented the originary relationship that Esposito theorizes between *bios*, *zoé*, and *techné*, something that modern biotechnologies make visible retroactively. We also mentioned the relationship between *communitas* and *immunitas* as two faces of the same coin that are always lurking in the background of his theorization.

Thirdly, we saw that immunitary paradigm enabled him to undo some of the 'enigmas' of biopolitics. It allows the Italian to grasp: a) the specific temporalities of biopolitics; b) the different senses and possible outcomes of biopolitics; c) the relationship with sovereign power; and d) the possibility of a common immunity or affirmative biopolitics. In particular, the immunitary logic of negative protection helps understand how modern biopolitics used forms of death in order to improve life.

Fourthly, we analyzed the theologico-political dispositive of personhood which separates life in zones of different value. We maintained that nowadays these exclusions are not made by the sovereign alone. He joins ventures with global finances and markets, which make life disposable and link personhood to the possession of human capital and private wealth.

Afterwards, we reconstructed how Esposito searches for affirmative biopolitics in a philosophy of the impersonal, discussing impersonal life and impersonal thought. In these last two points we can appreciate the possibility to overturn the thanatopolitical dispositives through a philosophy of immanence and singularity.

According to Esposito, it would be only from a philosophy that deconstructs the transcendent logic of Subject, Person, Sovereignty, Reason, Consciousness, and Law through an immersion into the plain of immanence that an affirmative biopolitics can be grasped. However, this philosophical notion of life might lead to an oblivion of the historic specificity of life today, leaving behind the Foucauldian problem of knowledge-power complexes and therefore ignoring specific forms of power at work that cannot be reduced to a generic reference to an always present political theology or immunitary

logic. If Esposito can legitimately criticize what he sees as an epistemological indetermination in Foucault's notion of life, he doesn't seem to resolve the problem by considering life and politics from a philosophical and deconstructive standpoint. To complete Foucault, one should refer to how post-organic, post-genomic, informatic life is being thought and produced today by biotechnologies of different kind and what power and political effects they have. Maybe it is not immunization but rather genetization, informatization, molecularisation, which explains today's biopolitics, bioeconomics, neuropolitics, and ethopolitics⁸¹. Maybe the impersonal, the presubjective and preindividual is not in itself a way out of biopower but the ground on which new forms of exploitation of living forms is taking place, in the informational era of biotechnologies that patent, produce and modify living forms⁸². Put otherwise, maybe to search for impersonal figures of thought leads to new deadlocks when new forms of machinic subjection take place: impersonal 'intelligent machines' of impersonal capitalism. In this sense, the risk of posing life in place of the subject is nothing compared to the risk of not thinking through what is life today or even if there is a unitary thing we can call life.

Therefore, my thesis is that the real problem in order to analyze biopolitics is not to solve the 'contradictions' or 'enigmas' that Foucault left us through a unitary paradigm like immunization, because the contradiction is part of the very processes and realities we have to analyze. At the same time, it is not in some great texts of the philosophical tradition that we will find an answer to the present predicaments and make possible affirmative biopolitics. I am not denying the importance of reading them carefully, but they don't have all the answers, especially to problems and facts those philosophers could not anticipate. If it is true that philosophy and politics have different logics and temporalities, it is no less true that affirmative biopolitics should be analyzed in political practices and not only in ontological speculation. As Tarizzo notes, if the successful Italian theory cannot establish a kind of linkage with politics and ongoing social transformations, resistance and invention, it risks becoming a theory for theory's sake⁸³. I am sure this is not what such inspiring thinkers as Esposito, among others, are expecting from their theories.

Therefore, even if Esposito's theory became indispensable to conceptualize and clarify the way we think biopolitics, there is still a lot to be done in the actualization of the diagnosis on biopolitics and the possible lines of resistance and flight that these power dispositives offer. To fulfill

⁸¹ Cfr. E. Sacchi, cit.; N. Rose, cit.; R. Ciccarelli, *Il potere biotecnologico. La vita nell'epoca della sua costituzione postgenomica*, in *Biopolitica, bioeconomia e processi di soggettivazione*, ed. by A. Amendola, L. Bazzicalupo, F. Chicchi, A. Tucci, Macerata 2008, pp. 73-82.

⁸² According to Marzocca, at least since Nazism, contemporary biopower draws not in immunology but in genetics. O. Marzocca, *Biopoder, Biopolítica, Política*, «Revista Trasversales», 16/2009. However, hasn't the informational paradigm of present day biopolitics enabled the emergence of post-genomic life? See R. Ciccarelli, cit; T. Lemke, cit; E. Sacchi, cit.

⁸³ D. Tarizzo, *Italian Theory*, cit.

this task, we must rethink today's forms of biopower and biopolitics, with, against and beyond Esposito's inspiring work.