

## REVIEW

**Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0822345350**

In reading *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body*, one question called out to me more than any other: which audience(s) is Ed Cohen writing for and why does this text in particular require such a response? This text, which should (and, I suspect, will) deservedly be lauded for its expansive composition, is structured as a detailed and rigorous historical genealogy of the modern human body within the biomedical enterprises of the past two centuries, particularly as seen through the lens of immunity and its bioethical, biomedical and biopolitical valences.

The reader is immersed in an interdisciplinary study of "...how medicine takes 'the body' 'modern' and reflects on the biopolitics this modern turn in medicine engenders... how medicine modernizes us by incarnating a theoretical practice that simultaneously... defines humans as organisms and as political actors... incorporates biopolitics as one of our consummately modern dimensions." (7) What follows is a socio-cultural and philosophical-theoretical patchwork of politics, ethics and religion whose causes and effects are investigated throughout each chapter: an exploration of how a multitude of forces exert themselves upon the making of the modern body, and how the equally multitudinous forms of the body resist, both offensively and defensively. This dynamic transforms and interweaves the conceptual, ontological and epistemological categories that Cohen uncompromisingly binds to geo-historical experiences that, in sum, commit the reader to an "Apotheosis of the Modern Body..." – the subtitle of the book. Within this paradigm, the category of apotheosis is what strikes me as most troubling and in need of inquiry in order to adequately illustrate the overall thrust and complexities of this rich text.

"Apotheosis" is a curious word choice. There is an aesthetico-theological connotation, with its etymology from the Greek being "to deify."<sup>1</sup> In the historical development of apotheosis, which I interpret as the rhizomatic confluence and exchange of these aforementioned forces and forms upon the body, the modern body/subject is, within the immunization paradigm, rendered to what is evidently a state of *exemption*. Yet apotheosis acts as a central topoi in the critical-conceptual foundation of Cohen's analysis. If an apotheosis of the modern body were to be characterized as one of divine or exalted stature, that is, within theological or aesthetic parameters, Cohen would seem to be unable to reconcile these differential consti-

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

tutions in the first instance for the deployment of his central argument: providing the adequate theoretical and conceptual ground for the construction of a modern body in an age of immunity, biopolitics and biomedicine. In turn, as meticulous as his trace of an historical genealogy of these networks is, one cannot help but notice an inconsistency in the development of his arguments based on an irreconcilability of the nature of apotheosis. Cohen noticeably favors an onto-theological approach (one might even suggest a messianic one) to the apotheosis of the modern body, wherein

“...Modernity... connotes a punctual immersion in the present which syncopates the eschatological timeframe espoused by premodern Christianity... Altering the criteria for...personhood, this metonymic shift contributes to de-stabilizing the religiously ordained hierarchies... The immanent body provides a temporal and spatial locus for biopolitical agency... differences among and between people... appear as attributes of bodies rather than gradations of souls.” (9)

I would argue that to alter the criteria for personhood, any apotheosis of the modern body must be disregarded altogether. Otherwise any “body worth defending” would be in service not to differences among people, or to a revised biopolitical agency, but to a psychopathology of defensive immunization that is imbricated by the libidinal drive to maintain a false-dualism between moral spiritedness and/or aesthetic exaltation. Thereby, the concept of freedom, in service to a new notion of personhood in modern political subjectship, would sprout from guilt and indebtedness, not autonomy.

There is no teleology implicit in Cohen’s apotheosis. For Cohen, apotheosis appears to characterize a psychopolitical imperative, accompanied by echoes of Judeo-Christian repentance and salvation: the “ensemble of practices that literally incorporates... an historical paradox... in so far as it conjures the body as a... biopolitical formation which we must have in order to be a person.” (10) Ian Hacking, whom Cohen is indebted to in many significant ways, but is marginalized in a dismissive endnote, in his book *Historical Ontology*,<sup>2</sup> seems to avoid the encumbered category of apotheosis by virtue of his “world-making by kind-making” dictum, with what he terms a “dynamic nominalism” fueling this action. Surprisingly, where Hacking and Cohen differ is only in their deployment of the essence to this theory, which to Hacking’s benefit, he roots in the socio-political, cultural, and material structures of experience and history, hence dissolving the possibility for an apotheosis of the body since the “kind-making” is not sacrificed to transcendence or zeal. Yet, its result as the “making up [of] people” is that very Foucauldian-inspired shift Cohen unpacks in his second chapter when he asks us to “...consider how the two axes of biopower, the anatomo-politics of bodies in the biopolitics of population, inform modern ideas about the body and personhood, not only giving rise to new legal, political, philosophical and economic subjects, but also enabling medicine to incorporate these new subjectivities as its political rationale.” (29) But Foucault neither claims an end to the subject, nor does he deify or exalt it. His subject, especially in his later writings, is one largely formed through the notion of the *dispositif* or apparatus, which prevents any elevation of the subject as it is constantly a body *in vivo*, wed, in part, to

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Hacking's future dynamic nominalism where the identification of the object and the subject arise and evolve in unison within an array of social, ethical, religious, scientific and cultural constituencies. The *dispositif* prevents Foucault from "confining" his subject, as it could be suggested he had done in work up through *The Order of Things*,<sup>3</sup> but which changed in his later writings (particularly in the concluding chapters to *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*). With the *dispositif*, the "making up people" occurs through an array of "engines," (methodologies, systems, institutions, and otherwise) synergistically concretizing an ontological disposition one attunes, and is attuned to, within these systems-based givens or facticities. Even if apotheosis here is to convey an ontological, political, socio-cultural totality, or the product of one (or several) *dispositifs*, Cohen unflinchingly upholds a fidelity to monadological subject(s).

Evoking Mary Poovey and scientist Claude Bernard in his third chapter, the valences converging in and around an aesthetic apotheosis of the modern body are explored. By implicitly interlacing apotheosis as both an aesthetic and theological category in his text, without articulating the boundaries which each categorical tense bequeaths to its reader/subject, such examples of "...public hygiene, envisions humans as vitally situated beings... bioscientific epistemology inverts this vision when Claude Bernard introduces the concept of *milieu interieur* and thereby legitimates laboratory equipment as the privileged locus for biological birth;" (29) these examples thereby illustrate a shift from one biomedical paradigm to another. This shift, from people as vitally dependent 'kinds,' – which motions to Poovey's public hygiene paradigm as denoting a constituent lack, a defense against immunization, and a biomedical corporeal exteriorization – toward the body's interiorization through new technology (itself embodying a unique aesthetic) witnesses "immunity-as-defense" codified in modern biomedical history, and is thus seen by Cohen in his last chapter as that which arises (*in-itself*) as "the apotheosis of the modern body." (29) If "world-making" truly is "kind-making," then to hold apotheosis as an ostensibly invariable static category throughout these distinct historical and scientific turns is to de-value the genealogical didacticism that Cohen unravels, and also closes the debate for a negative or positive biopolitics by neutralizing what must be noted as cumulative results analogous with an apotheosis of the modern body.

In contrast to Poovey, Cohen claims to "analyze the modern nature of human nature and changing biological and medical perceptions about the human organism itself... especially as the human organism increasingly imagines and lives itself as a biological phenomenon separate... from an environment that only subsequently seems to surround or even oppose it." Though it is clear that for Cohen the immunization paradigm sets off this psychosocial transition, it is apotheosis that elicits the fear and guilt "the human organism... imagines." (10) While Cohen is taken by the rapture of the aesthetic apotheosis, Poovey establishes how communitarian exchanges of immunity's pathos has, through history, been conscribed more or less toward a social and material engagement. These are features which Cohen seems to dismiss out of hand on the basis that "...this book... is not... to describe a general empirical observation that disease affects different people differently. Nor does it seek to address... the historiographies of biology.... Instead, *A Body Worth Defending* engages

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Hacking, "Les mots et le choses, forty years on," Collège de France, For Humanities Center, Columbia University. October 6, 2005.

immunity's migration from politic and law into the domain of medicine and science..."(8) Is it really so easy to separate these two modes of inquiry? Are they not on some level mutually implicative, and thus necessitating a balanced assessment? Is it not defeatist to claim an apotheosis of the modern body without considering those elements Cohen chooses to neglect?

Though Cohen, at times, both affirms and points to the negative affects of those *dispositifs* that compromise the apotheosis of the modern body, his target inherently becomes one of either moralizing immunity and biopolitics or indulging in its '*milieu interieur*,' by both equally aestheticizing and deifying biomedicine's negative or positive contributions. It might now be easier to see why Cohen's book proves somewhat problematic for its reader and intended audiences. Though ripe in its research and important for bringing a much-needed historical excursus into a critical engagement, in light of the problems outlined above, how might one assess the overall value of *A Body Worth Defending*? Where this text will find its niche is a questionable proposition at best.

We must also be reminded that though an historical genealogy of immunity within the biomedical paradigm is novel and useful, the notion of an immunitarian biopolitics and its complex vicissitudes go back at least a decade to the work of the Italian philologist and political philosopher, Roberto Esposito. In both Esposito's landmark text *Immunitas: Protezione e negazione della vita* (*Immunity: Security and the Denial of Life*) and his essay "The Paradigm of Immunization" in *Bios: Biopolitica a filosofia* (*Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*), Esposito aims to situate immunity within an affirmative Foucauldian biopolitics, rather than a negative, or thanatopolitical one (which Foucault has been noted to carry out<sup>4</sup>). Both Esposito and Cohen's models of immunity align in their mutual affirmation of a *Vitalpolitik* – the politics of life itself. However, what complicates Cohen's affirmative immunitarian biopolitics is not only the sphere of biomedicine, which has a reductive affect on the breadth of his notion of biopolitical immunity, but between each theorist's similar strategizing of the force and forms of life which construct, unfold and account for immunitarian functions within the human body. It is Cohen alone who elevates in an aesthetico-theological manner those immunitarian webs which constitute the apotheosis of the modern body. Conversely, Esposito employs both immunity and autoimmunity as philosophico-metaphorical tropes by which to illustrate the matrices of the biopolitical. Here, suggested by Brett Levinson, between "...immunized life, individual but socialized human bodies, against un-immunized life... a virus, or the Other cast as a virus," which, Levinson continues, "...the body... is naturally immune from certain infirmities."<sup>5</sup> By choosing to render immunity as a less fixed term, Esposito is able to deconstruct the subject affirmatively by commingling biomedicine and metaphor, to speak of the exteriorization of immunitarian function within the rhetoric of governmentality instead of medicine, and its interiorization as an explication of the viral presence of alterity, or those sovereign controls which render us as biopolitically autoimmune.

Ed Cohen's *A Body Worth Defending* is nonetheless a noble and worthwhile effort. By forging new directions in a discourse already well developed, but one lacking a proper genealogy, he makes motions to clarify the biomedical history of the modern body and its

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<sup>4</sup> Brett Levinson, "Esposito and Biopolitics," SUNY Buffalo/University of Aberdeen Conference, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

encounter with biological functions of immunity; however, one must ask: is such a result worth what has clearly been an enormous task? If the destabilization of the subject was taken to task as a further step in Esposito's direction, Cohen may not have had to elevate the modern body in the way he does in order to provide sufficient conclusions. Apotheosis has been shown to drastically encumber and at times lessen Cohen's argumentative thrust. Yet with a decisive reading of Foucault, a well-researched insight into contemporary biopolitics and immunity, both philosophically and scientifically, and an historical genealogy of these topics that has no current rival, there is little doubt this work will have longstanding status.

Elliot A. Jarbe  
PhD Candidate  
The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism  
Faculty of Social Science  
The University of Western Ontario  
Somerville House Rm. 2345  
London, Ontario, N6A 3K7  
Canada