Foucault Studies

REVIEW

Timothy C. Campbell, *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben* **(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-8166-7465-7**

This short book pursues a far-reaching and critical question: is the academic study of biopolitics undermined by a preoccupation with death? Timothy C. Campbell marshals an impressive set of close readings to diagnose the problem—which he sees more as an undercurrent than an orthodoxy—and then gestures toward a biopolitics that reinforces *bíos* (life) rather than *thanatos* (death).

Concerned that contemporary biopolitics has tended to reduce to a thanatopolitics, Campbell turns to readings of some likely suspects in the Continental tradition, beginning with Heidegger, whose distinction between "proper" and "improper writing" has given rise to a "crypto-thanatopolitics" that Heidegger locates in technology. Campbell deftly traces this tendency through readings of "the two most important Italian philosophers writing today in an ostensibly thanatological key," (31) Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito. According to Campbell, "The providential machinery that Agamben sees producing bare life today in the West looks remarkably similar to the machinery of proper and improper writing that [according to Heidegger] 'enframed' mankind, that made her and him ready at hand… and resemble everyone else…" (64) To complicate matters a bit, the contrast Campbell wishes to draw between Agamben and Esposito comes to light by way of their readings of Gilles Deleuze: "…where Agamben flattens Deleuze's modes of existence into desubjectified subjects and those who chronicle that traumatic process, Esposito prefers to distinguish between subject and person," (66) a move that Campbell ultimately uses to nudge the biopolitical back toward the *bíos*. Indeed, for Campbell, despite the significant challenges of neoliberal governmentality, the thanatopolitics he seeks to diffuse "will not consist primarily of the attempt to turn persons into things," as Esposito argues, "but rather to crush the person and thing, to make them coextensive in a living being." (72) Like other theorists, such as Jacques Derrida, who have emphasized the ultimate impossibility of such projects, the possibility of this strategy's failure motivates Campbell's text and reopens what he considers to be properly biopolitical spaces.

Campbell's final extended reading engages Peter Sloterdijk's "immunitary biopolitics." In Sloterdijk Campbell sees a "powerful inflection of globalization toward the thanatopolitical" insofar as globalization is premised on the externalization of others in the name of the formation of community. For Sloterdijk, "the thanatopolitical cannot be thought apart from contemporary and individualized forms of immunity and the devastating effects they have on

community." (89) To reach this perspective, however, Sloterdijk conflates power with security to such a degree that the thanatopolitical becomes "the name given to the end of communal projections and the death by exposure of those left without protection." This implicates "immunitary regimes designed by individuals" in the onset of ecological catastrophe and world markets that "do the work of death." (93) Technology for Sloterdijk, as for Heidegger, plays a central role in these developments.

To be clear, Campbell does not assert that any of these thinkers are doctrinally thanatopolitical, and his rhetoric illustrates his wish to use a paring knife rather than a broadsword: instead of holding absolute thanatopolitical commitments, Heidegger, Agamben, Esposito and Sloterdijk "assume a sort of thanatopolitical tonality" (29) and write in thanatopolitical "tenors," "keys," and "emphases." Similarly, even when addressing what he appears to consider the height of the thanatopolitical in Agamben,

Campbell's reading is decidedly mixed, as "Agamben occasionally thinks technology in such a way that technology is not immediately transformed into a catastrophic power over life." (35) Indeed, Campbell credits the persuasiveness of Agamben's *The Coming Community* to its "evasion" of thanatopolitics and embrace of life.

Campbell's language tells us a great deal about the nature of his critique. Critically, the force of thanatopolitics appears to issue from its subtlety and ubiquity. Whereas Foucault understood the thanatopolitical to be a possibility, but only a possibility, Campbell sees in Heidegger, Agamben, and Esposito a totalizing "drift" that works itself into textual pores that make them indissociable from their theoretical frameworks. All of this makes for an extremely careful, detailed—if highly technical—examination of contemporary thanatopolitical trends. However, I fear, Campbell may not be giving his own analysis enough force. The reading of Agamben, for example, at times appears to warrant greater emphasis than "drifts" and "tenors" evoke. Agamben, as Campbell notes, implicates the synergistic relationship between biopolitics and sovereignty in the onset of "total management of life." Such a view is not a tempered disposition, but a structural argument. The problem may have deeper roots than Campbell admits.

Campbell's goal, ultimately, is to see our way out of these thanatopolitical currents. Accordingly, his text concludes with a vision of a biopolitics—culled through a flurry of readings of Foucault, Freud, Benjamin, Deleuze, Connolly, among others—that aims at restoring the *bíos* to its place in the biopolitical canon, if only to tarry with the thanatic powers that so many have identified as part of the modern, liberal ethos. This brings us back to (perhaps) Campbell's most important contribution, which regards not death, but politics. Politics, as Campbell shows, remains possible within biopolitical contexts, even when such contexts are encumbered by "improper" modes of *technê*. Ultimately, the thanatopolitical drift is premised on a misreading of Heidegger that makes drifts *fait accompli*. As Campbell notes, in Agamben's telling,

> "The transformation of Heidegger's critique of technology… now moves well beyond Foucault's interpretation of the *dispositif* [apparatus] to include almost every knowledge, practice, measure, and institution that makes useful "the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings." (55)

To challenge the thanatopolitical drift, Campbell turns to Foucault, mining a range of texts and lectures to piece together what he calls Foucault's "biopolitical ethics." According to Campbell, the turn to Foucault is logical because,

> "More than any other thinker examined thus far, Foucault responds to the major questions [of thanatopolitics]; indeed, in some sense, Foucault responds to himself across his later work—a thanatopolitical Foucault who is met by and in my view, superseded by an affirmatively biopolitical Foucault." (119)

In Campbell's reading, Foucault's contribution is his insistence that not all *technê* slouch toward *thanatos*, but may be deployed in the service of *bíos*. According the Campbell, "On Foucault's read… *technê* is not simply a *dispositif*, given that *technê* wasn't historically always interested in capturing *bíos* as merely the self, as a mode to master care; rather, *technê* was the impetus for the construction of forms of life." (135)

Alas, for all of its theoretical import, Campbell's contribution to the reintroduction of the *bíos* into biopolitics remains undertheorized. Ultimately for Campbell, "Our question must be how to potentialize attention because to do so would be a way of auto-affirming creation and, with it, an affirmative biopolitics." (148) But this manifests in a reading of play in Bataille and Derrida that never fully materializes. Campbell concludes with the insight that, "A *technê* of *bíos* thought through play might be one yet unexplored way to forgo 'the dour naturalism' of biopolitics today, in which the object of politics would be merely biological life or that would have the object of life be thinkable only as a part of a negative politics." (154)

Still, one wonders how this could be accomplished *in fact*, given the serious challenges presented by neoliberalism that motivate Agamben's, Esposito's, and Sloterdijk's respective projects. As numerous critics have suggested in their readings of Derrida, Foucault, and other twentieth century thinkers who kept the possibility of resistance alive in their work, what is needed more than ever is an articulation of what specific libratory strategies and practices within the biopolitical realm might look like. To this end, Campbell has given us great insight into the problem, and a theoretical roadmap toward the answer. This being said, it would be nice to know more about how this newly *bios*-enriched biopolitics can come to pass. A logical and useful follow-up to *Improper Life*, then, would build upon the general theoretical framework Campbell has afforded us to conceptualize more fully the specific *technai* capable of refocusing biopolitics away from death and toward life.

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