



REVIEW

Robert Mitchell, *Infectious Liberty. Biopolitics between Romanticism and Liberalism*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2021. Pp. 304. ISBN: 9780823294596 (paperback).

Romantic-era novelists and liberal theorists of political economy rarely cohabitate in discourse, conceivably because the Romantic penchant for individual uniqueness and the philosophers' birds-eye perspective on collective behaviour do not make for easy bedfellows. Thus, Robert Mitchell's *Infectious Liberty* spans an unusual arc by revisiting works associated with Romanticism and liberalism through the lens of Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics. The book's purpose is twofold: firstly, Mitchell aims to redeem Romantic literature as what Foucault termed 'technologies of the self,' as means to facilitate critical review and an expanded perspective of central biopolitical concepts. Secondly, he seeks to untether biopolitics from the frame of liberalism with the help of Romantic-era thinking and push it "toward a positive, affirmative and just version," a collective strategy intent on self-transformation over self-preservation – with a view to the political and ecological challenges of our own times (p. 5).

Each of the book's six chapters reviews a particular biopolitical concern within Romantic-type literature or liberal theory, starting with the topic of genius. The vicissitudes in the lives of extraordinary people are a regular theme in Romantic literature, yet typically portrayed from an individual's perspective. Examples like Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) also ponder the collective fate of obscure geniuses, dwindling unrecognized where hampered by poverty. William Wordsworth, moreover, alerts to the threat of technological progress pushing substance by the wayside; he fears that the economics of the printing press will submerge high-value literature in a flood of lighter, more popular fare. For both these authors, the loss of talent and their positive contribution to society is not merely the individual's issue but a national problem, and a collective response an imperative to forestall the consequences. Their discourse thus promotes a form of biopolitics targeting individual uniqueness.

Fiction in general has the scope to portray populations in a way that theories of political economy cannot, according to Mitchell. Romantic-era authors in particular developed approaches capable of representing different population models, the forces they are subject to and their capacity to create and shape norms, yet with the individual's uniqueness in

mind. Such works reflect in a more subtle way the “difference-oriented theory of population” which eighteenth-century physiocrats and political theorists employed (p. 81). Using the debate between William Godwin and Thomas Malthus as an example, Mitchell presents two different models of population and their ramifications. Malthus conceives of population as a homogenous mass and the exogenous factors that most determine its crucial metric – growth – as beyond human reach. The population itself hence needs to reduce itself to ensure survival. Godwin, in response, stresses the perfectibility of society, manifest in institutions that form a continuous track record of collective progress and improvement – the endogenous saving grace to its long-term wellbeing. Mitchell then contrasts these two population models with alternatives from Romantic literature, notably Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and its protagonist Victor’s ponderings over the life and death of the population he was essentially to create – not just with one manmade creature but with the monster’s mate and therefore reproductive capacities, autonomy and heterogeneity. Rather than reading Victor as a model authoritarian ruler, Mitchell sees *Frankenstein’s* purpose in sketching the world in terms of alternative types of populations rather than endorsing one model over another.

Not just science fiction but also realist novels of the nineteenth century bear marks of biopolitical consciousness. Mitchell discusses two Romantic-era literary techniques of particular relevance in that regard: character-systems and free indirect discourse. Character systems continuously expanded from the Romantic period and came of age in the nineteenth century novels of authors like Émile Zola, Herman Melville and Honoré de Balzac. These increased casts of human and non-human characters exemplify reciprocal relationships between individual characters or factors and the novels’ populations at large. The literary device of free indirect discourse provided these entities with a medium of expression and the authors with a means to represent “unarticulated logics, comportments and forces” (p. 100). Thus, authors could express their observations on populations at large and channel their own scientific interests through their creative franchise – Flaubert his theories on art, Zola and Balzac their interest in milieu, and George Eliot her curiosity in evolutionary sciences.

Some examples from Romantic-era literature show that the interaction between human populations and external forces were also imagined to work in reverse. In contrast to contemporary anxieties fuelled by the dawn of the Anthropocene, a number of Romantic authors made enthusiastic projections about how the global climate could be deliberately changed in order to achieve more hospitable seasons in certain localities. Erasmus Darwin’s poem *The Botanic Garden* (1791), for example, speculated that the local weather could be amended by shifting the global position of polar ice masses and consequently redirecting wind flows. Shelley’s idea of climate change in *Queen Mab* (1813) approaches the issue from a biopolitical perspective, locating terraforming powers within the population’s food habits and resulting flows in economics, politics and nature. By including a recent science-fiction novel, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Aurora* (2015), Mitchell adds a Neo-Romantic scenario where terraforming ambitions are recast in a future age of space exploration, launched in response to the self-destructive cusp of the Anthropocene. To Mitchell, both

Robinson and Shelley present reparative rather than utopian scenarios, seeking to redeem the relationship between humans and nature through a positive, joyful process of engagement.

The book's last two chapters offer a comparative review of two central biopolitical concepts in liberal theory: collective experiment and self-regulation. The analysis seeks to demarcate the line where biopolitical experimentation, intended to maximize human capacities, slips into 'immunitary logic,' a term coined by Roberto Esposito, whereby isolated parts of a population are deliberately disadvantaged or made to suffer for the sake of the collective's survival. Mitchell's other concern is to map the relationship and difference between neo- and liberal tendencies with a view to biopolitics. He investigates conceptions of collective experimentation from the early eighteenth century to modern days by surveying five authors' reflections on the theme: John Arbuthnot and mass inoculation as a liberal experiment; Edmund Burke's appraisal of traditional social order as a guarantor for organic societal experimentation; John Stuart Mill's reinvention of government as a central repository for information gained through collectives' experiments; and Friedrich Hayek's neoliberal appraisal of the market as the sole legitimate mechanism of collective knowledge processing and dissemination. The survey concludes with the contemporary sociologist Ulrich Beck and his concept of 'risk society' where the forces of modernity rebound through the negative environmental side effects that now affect our collective development worldwide. To Beck, the idea of a risk society accounts for the fact that the global population, unwittingly, is subject to collective self-experiments, e.g., by being exposed to environmental hazards. The key challenge for both scientific and lay communities is to recognize the experiments as such, gather and assess perspectives, and synthesize them into one common experience.

Self-regulation, on the other hand, was for Foucault the one principle of social relations responsible for the simultaneous emergence of biopolitics and liberalism in the eighteenth century. To Mitchell, the then-discovery of this principle also explains the centrality of the term 'regulation' in novels, discourses and debates around the turn of the nineteenth century. Some interpretations imagine the existence of an invariable standard, pronounced by a divine imperative. Alternatively, a variable standard for self-regulation is conceptualized whereby the ultimate knowledge is not located in an omniscient sovereign but a collective of fallible individuals. Romantic-era authors, in Mitchell's view, made inroads in identifying and concretizing the second, variable standard of regulation and the crucial questions it beckons for our society. The invariable standard appears in Malthus' theory, who believes in divine, static principles organizing the waxing and waning of populations through exogenous factors like food supply. Burke, too, imagined taste to rely on stable principles. Kant's reflection on regulative thinking, in contrast, declares the faculty of human judgment as the sole stable factor, not the content of it. Here, self-regulative thinking is a social activity that requires the individual to think from another person's standpoint in order to judge the validity of their own behaviour.

The role of self-regulation gains new currency in post-Romantic debates amongst ecologists and neoliberalists alike. Environmental science commonly casts the role of humans

as a disruptive factor to an ecosystem's natural balance. The concept of the Anthropocene, in contrast, "is precisely intended to understand how human activities are part of an ecological process"—unconsciously, automatically (p. 217). The neoliberal School of Chicago, in contrast, contended that exactly the conscious reflection of this integral role was the first necessary step to individual self-regulation, albeit that this mode of thinking was limited to economic considerations only, by definition fundamental to human cognition. The solution to contemporary challenges, for both left-wing and neoliberal circles, relies on the commons, according to Mitchell, a format for self-regulation embedded in a social organization that is valued precisely because it is assumed to be organic but not automatic. Although each camp depicts different scenarios, they both emphasize local embeddedness, a community's autonomy to act through collective decision making and the importance of learning from collective experience over time.

Mitchell closes the discussion by drawing on Hannah Arendt, Roberto Esposito and Bruno Latour with a view to the global future. Latour in particular claims that the only constructive way for humanity to evolve in times of the Anthropocene is to continuously expand the commons worldwide, by creating and intensifying interconnections between human and non-human allies and making the world ever more inclusive in order to address environmental challenges ahead. His argument, however, deliberately eclipses the concept of self-regulation and stresses active participation instead. The debate is concluded by Mitchell with the closing question as to whether the global threat will be enough to unify communities worldwide – and the projection "that perhaps this is the case – but only if what unites these common worlds is not a threat but rather a promise ... of greater flourishing in the future" (p. 229).

Published in 2021, Mitchell's book, with or without the recurrent theme of mass inoculation, is an undeniably timely read during the current global pandemic and its unprecedented level of biopolitical experimentation on an international scale. Precisely because this link is so obvious, Mitchell explicitly vows to abstain from direct references; yet the message does not lose in poignancy, and his careful analysis of biopolitical concepts in theoretical discourse and literature successfully expands the reader's awareness of biopolitical consciousness in unexpected corners. The term 'Romanticism' is somewhat stretched throughout the book both chronologically and thematically. Although Mitchell admits to a less-than-canonical definition with the intent "to underscore the continuing persistence of Romantic-era approaches, framings, dilemmas, and considerations into the present," some of the examples he associates with the period do not comfortably seem to fit that category (p. 9). Granted these cases serve the discussion no less effectively, they could perhaps have stood just as well without this label. The impression that lasts is that Mitchell, alongside a thoughtful semantic study, manages to import a fundamentally positive and transformative attitude from a period of unbound enthusiasm for the human spirit into an age where global environmental disaster could but inspire collective despair instead.

Author info

Antonia Karaisl
PhD in Intellectual History (Warburg Institute)
antoniakaraisl@gmail.com
CEO of Rescribe Ltd
UK