

**Timothy Campbell**

*Improper Life: Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben.*

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2011.

189 pages

\$75.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-816-7465-7)

Tim Campbell, for some time a translator of and commentator on Roberto Esposito's works on biopolitics, now offers a detailed exposition of the key thinkers in biopolitics, the new fetish in critical theory. *Improper Life*, a slim and effectively organized volume, is a significant work in contemporary philosophy.

After Foucault, the body has attracted considerable attention from philosophers as the centerpiece of power, care, governance, and politics. With posthumanism emerging as a philosophical paradigm, interwoven with bioethics and animal studies, the body's significance has only been reiterated.

Campbell opens with a discussion of Heidegger. Arguing that many of the arguments about biopolitics depend on Heidegger's ontological elaborations of technology, Campbell goes on to argue that for Heidegger the distinction between 'proper' and 'improper' forms of writing is one between proper and improper being. Campbell detects a shift towards a thanatopolitics in Heidegger's thought, where technology tends to hijack Being by distancing man from 'proper' writing (the typewriter ensures that man loses his 'essence' and thus distances him from his identity). But Campbell also discerns in Heidegger an assumption that technology 'contributes to [an] underlying and essential distinction between man as *animalitas* and man in some future as *humanitas*' (27), where the former (*animalitas*) is the human who is merely the subject of communications driven by technology, and the later is the subject of 'proper' writing.

Chapter Two turns to Agamben and Esposito, the leading thinkers on biopolitics today. Campbell first explicates Agamben's famous and often abused concepts of *zoē* and *bíos*, between bare life and 'proper' or political life. Agamben argues that the humanity is arrived at only through an expulsion of the animal, or the improper. This is made possible through the *dispositifs*, the apparatuses of individuation, control and exclusion. *Dispositifs* produce the 'proper' subject when the individual divides her own subjecthood, separating the profane from the sacred. Esposito, reading Roman law, is interested in the rise of the very idea of the 'person'; like Agamben and Foucault, he sees the *dispositif* as the machinery that enables personhood. The 'person' emerges when one part of the subject (the improper) is subjugated by the other, where one becomes the object to the other, a process that, in Campbell's reading of Esposito, 'literally involv[ed] the creation of new slaves as a way of guaranteeing one's own personhood in Roman antiquity' (71). [COMM. Can that really be the correct use of square brackets in the citation?]

Peter Sloterdijk's 'immunitary biopolitics' is the subject of Campbell's next chapter. Opening with Sloterdijk's work on globalization – wherein Sloterdijk argues that 'globalization is the making of the earth as man's home inhabited by the *homo habitans* and that it cannot begin at all until the outside has been marked as radically external to mankind' (87) – Campbell

proposes that globalization is the creation of ‘spheres of protection brought inside’ (89) to protect from the external. Thus immunity-making is at the heart of the capitalist-globalization project. Increasingly the emphasis is on individual security, and thus constitutes a process of moving away from the collective and the communal. Here, the immunity provided by the nation-state is weakened and the individual immunity regimes are strengthened.

In chapter Four Campbell explicates *technē* as a ‘practice able to configure different forms of life as forms of play’ (119). Campbell proposes, via Merleau-Ponty and Jonathan Crary, an emphasis on attention. ‘Attention’, says Campbell, would mean ‘a mode of approaching the object without incorporating or expelling’ (144), a ‘form of life that avoids being captured by the self’s acquisitive power’ (144). Such a view, Campbell suggests, moves life toward ‘greater openness and relationality as opposed to defense’ (156) or immunity.

*Improper Life* contributes in a major way to several disciplines and emergent debates in the social sciences and the humanities. An understanding of the key concepts of bios, biopolitics, immunity and community is essential to animal studies, bioethics, posthumanism and social studies of science. Versions of these concepts have figured in Jacques Derrida, Matthew Calarco, Donna Haraway, Cary Wolfe and other thinkers who explore the borders of the human and animal and whose concerns include the processes through which the very idea of the human has been generated – processes that are essentially modes of exclusion. Wolfe’s work in animal studies and posthumanism, like Matthew Calarco’s in animal studies or Cora Diamond’s in philosophy, for instance, demonstrates how debates about the nature of intelligence, language, and rationality have been geared toward excluding animals from the realm of ‘full life’. Campbell’s exploration of the *dispositifs* and thanatopolitics underscores the processes through which the immune individual—a being with no obligation toward the community—comes into play, even as this process of individuation and exclusion leaves several forms of life (including some human ones) from the realm of the living. Well-written with considerable attention to the exegetical, *Improper Life* is a serious contribution to posthuman studies and philosophy.

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