

July 2019

Affirmative Biopolitics at the Canadian Association of Italian Studies Conference 2019

Orvieto 13-16 June 2019

By Tim Christiaens (KU Leuven)

From the 13th to the 16th of June 2019, the Canadian Association of Italian Studies organized its annual conference in Orvieto. The conference in general dealt with the whole variety of subjects that form part of the corpus of 'Italian Studies'. Among these different topics, several were of interest to the research on Italian Thought. Professor Giacomo Marramao gave a keynote lecture on politics and contingency in the works of Niccolò Machiavelli, while there were several talks scattered among the different panels on thinkers like Tommaso Campanella (Corrado Claverini, Maurizio Pegrari), Pasolini (Alessandro Fiorilli, Domenico Palumbo), and Dante (a.o. Paolo Scartoni, Nicolò Crisafi, Nicola Esposito). The Low Countries branch of the Italian Thought Network (Tim Christiaens, Joost De Bloois, and Stijn De Cauwer) organized three bilingual panels particularly around the notion of 'affirmative biopolitics' in Italian Thought and, more specifically, in the works of Roberto Esposito. Eight presentations were delivered on the first and last days of the conference.

Tim Christiaens (KU Leuven) gave a talk entitled 'Against the Republican Foucault: Affirmative biopolitics from Canguilhem to Esposito'. He argues that, in the footsteps of Michel Foucault's research on biopolitics and neoliberal governmentality, many researchers have attempted to formulate a notion of affirmative biopolitics. He critically evaluated one such attempt, namely Miguel Vatter's republican variant. The latter argues that, according to Foucault, neoliberalism fails as a governmental project because it represses the capacity of human collectivities to democratically govern itself. Affirming the potential for republican self-government would then constitute an emancipatory biopolitics. He argued that this version does not work as an interpretation of Foucault nor as a valid critique of neoliberalism. Using the influence of Canguilhem on Foucault, He proposed to locate the potential for resistance not in the collective capacity for self-government, but in the vital normativity of living beings in the interaction with their milieu, as shown by Roberto

Esposito. It is the biological propensity to deviate from pre-established norms that provides a basis for an affirmative biopolitics capable of exceeding the imperatives of neoliberal governmentality.

Ivan Dimitrijevic (University of Warsaw) presented on 'Politica e morte. Il coraggio e il governo nel pensiero di Alessandro Biral'. He discussed the writings of the forgotten philosopher and Hobbes-specialist Alessandro Biral on the distinction between mere survival and the good life. Whereas modernity marks a qualitative shift toward a biopolitics concerned with the promotion of mere biological life – according to Biral, exemplified in the writings of Hobbes – the classical tradition provides a critical backdrop to this biologization of politics from the point of view of the good life. He presents the figure of Socrates, someone who consents to his own death in the name of the higher truth of philosophy and the good life, as the quintessential critic. The Socratic impulse within the philosophical tradition is consequently a resource to counter the proliferation of negative biopolitics.

Marco Dal Pozzolo (Ecole Normale Supérieure) gave a contribution about 'Nietzsche e la biopolitica affermativa'. The influence of Nietzsche is instrumental in understanding Esposito's biopolitics and the affirmative dimension of his thought. Indeed, Esposito's biopolitics is centred on the immanence of politics in life, the common power of living bodies, and the problem of the political-technological manipulation of the body (in *Bios* and *Termini della politica*); all these themes derive from Nietzschean insights. Accordingly, the affirmative dimension of Esposito's thought is strengthened by his interpretation of the community-immunity dichotomy in the light of the Nietzschean concepts of active and reactive force (in *Da Fuori. Una filosofia per l'Europa*); similarly, Esposito uses Nietzsche in order to counter both a negative interpretation of political opposition (in *Politica e Negazione*) and a nihilistic reading of negative anthropology (in *Immunitas*). On top of innovating the Italian debate on Nietzsche, Esposito's reading of Nietzsche differentiates his conception of biopolitics from Foucault's one, especially from *Il faut défendre la société*.

Stijn De Cauwer (KU Leuven) discussed 'The Possibilities and Limitations of Roberto Esposito's Theories about Biopolitics'. In this paper, he talked about the strengths, but also the limitations, of the work of Roberto Esposito to understand contemporary political challenges. Esposito's work is particularly impressive as a detailed archeology of certain political concepts, and, according to De Cauwer, some of his insights are very relevant for understanding various political problems of today. De Cauwer however warns that Esposito's specific theoretical approach does not allow him to analyze, for example,

new protest movements in sufficient detail. Esposito argues that Michel Foucault's use of the term 'biopolitics' is inadequate to understand the connection between life and politics and he suggests the interaction between 'community' and 'immunity' as a better alternative. He bases his argument, however, on an etymological argument, which causes problems when he wants to formulate solutions. The notion of 'immunity' could be very useful to analyze various contemporary political phenomena, from right-wing populism to xenophobia, but the etymological argument of Esposito limits this potential. At the end of his books, Esposito often points towards the theories and concepts of other thinkers to find solutions, abandoning his own theoretical framework. The limitations of Esposito's theoretical approach are especially visible when he tries to adopt his theories to contemporary political situations. At the end of the text "Community, Immunity, Biopolitics", Esposito pleads for the development of an affirmative biopolitics, which amounts to a politics based on the common. At the same time, however, he argues that we no longer have the terminology to talk about the common, which makes the construction of a politics based on the common difficult. Similarly, at the end of *Persons and Things*, Esposito describes the protestors occupying squares as demanding an entirely new political lexicon and political institutions. The present political institutions will have to respond to these demands or 'implode'. Esposito can only apply his theoretical framework to the various occupy movements by presenting them in a very vague and abstract manner. His approach does not allow for an analysis of the specific context, the adopted strategies or the social position of the protestors. These views contrast with those of Hardt and Negri, who argued that the current capitalist system increasingly relies on the common and that a politics based on the common has to be actively constituted by means of horizontally organized forms of cooperation. Finally, he presented the theories of Stuart Hall on cultural forms as an alternative approach to understand the function of immunological terminology for political movements.

Vappu Helmisaari (University of Helsinki) presented her work on 'Roberto Esposito and the Escape from the Hobbesian State'. For Roberto Esposito, Thomas Hobbes is the founder of the immunitary paradigm that Esposito opposes. The Hobbesian idea of the origin of the state is based on the exit from the state of nature by giving all power to the sovereign. The horizontal relation between people in a community is broken and replaced by a vertical one. All social intercourse outside the exchange between protection and obedience is eliminated, and this makes the political order of sovereignty possible. The fear of violent death that all feel toward the other is in the Hobbesian scheme replaced by the

fear of the sovereign. Esposito finds this scheme 'immunitary', i.e. separating people from each other in an attempt of each person to protect oneself.

Joost De Bloois (University of Amsterdam) delved into the notion of 'Esposito's Europe: Biopolitics, Populism, Democracy'. He took, as a starting point, the recent emergence of right-wing populism in Europe and the Netherlands more particularly, giving a biopolitical reading of the phenomenon. Populism frequently spreads through an immunitary discourse that portends to uphold the health and purity of the population against foreign threats, such as migrants and 'otherworldly liberal elites'. To survive, the people has allegedly to excise these harmful elements from the body politic. This has become very explicit in the rhetoric of, for instance, Thierry Baudet in the Netherlands. Using Esposito's writings on Europe in *Da Fuori*, De Bloois speculated about what a European democratic response could be to the rise of immunitary populism.

Heather Lynch (Glasgow Caledonian University) presented a talk on 'Productive violence: Esposito's Affirmative Biopolitics in the Home'. The paradox of life's destruction of life in the pursuit of life has been rendered by various theorists to different effect. While Agamben has been criticised for his tendency toward thanatopolitics or politics of death, Esposito proposes a more nuanced, productive reading of the concept which affirms as it negates. The influences of Spinoza, Deleuze and Nietzsche allow him to not only forge this affirmative path but also to depart from Foucault's anthropocentrism and develop a posthuman politics of life. This generates alternative forms of resistance which are not reliant on binaries of life/death or human/other, but on affective multiplicities within which the pathogenic is productive. This affirmation does not deny or subsume the violence of life but affords consideration of violence as a condition for unfolding life. While his theorisation of productive destruction provides a frame which affords deliberation on the nuance of violence it also precipitates a problem of ethical equivalence. This paper draws on an anthropological study of Glasgow's Govanhill neighbourhood to deliberate the ethical concerns exposed by the violent tendency of Esposito's affirmative biopolitics. Govanhill is an area well documented as a migrant portal and place of vibrant cultural diversity alongside poverty and ethnic tension. The presence of unwanted life in the form of bedbugs, cockroaches and rodents provides insight into the violence of life as a more than human struggle in the home. This provokes questions on how to act when all options negate one form of life over another. Esposito's affirmative biopolitics affords insight into the ethics of violence as a dissonant yet productive force which reframes this problem.

Erik Sporon Fiedler (University of Copenhagen), lastly, gave a contribution on ‘Affirmative Biopolitics and Anthropotechnics: Remarks on the Emancipatory and Soteriological Potentials of Roberto Esposito’s and Peter Sloterdijk’s Engagement with the Present’. In this paper, he juxtaposed the affirmative aspects of the philosophies of Roberto Esposito and Peter Sloterdijk. This is done through a consideration of how Esposito thinks biopolitics as containing a possibility for developing a positive politics of life. Although this is something that still remains to be actualized, Esposito offers concrete outlines for how such a politics of life might be thought and practiced. As both a contrast and a supplement to Esposito’s thesis, he engaged with Sloterdijk’s concept of anthropotechnics as it is presented and developed in his essays *Rules for the Human Zoo* and *You Must Change Your Life*. Anthropotechnics offers a different way of grasping and bridging the relationship between politics and life that dominates so much of contemporary political thinking. He proposed to mutually broaden their varying positions to nuance the perspectives of the affirmative aspects of their philosophies. He finally briefly considered the emancipatory and soteriological potential of the positions, and thus reflecting on the hopes and possible implications that these perspectives might have for both a European and Global contemporary state continually characterized by crisis.