

Sara Guyer and Richard C. Keller

Life after Biopolitics

For a critical frame that has been with us for decades, biopolitics has proven extraordinarily resilient. Writings about human life on almost any scale—from the molecule to the species, from pharmacological development to the stewardship of life, from the rhetoric and poetics of animacy to the logic of genocide—draw deeply from the wells of biopower. The keyword *biopolitics* is vastly inclusive. Yet the philosopher Michel Foucault's outline of a theory of biopolitics in the mid-1970s (which many consider the foundation of the concept) was also oddly specific. Foucault wrote of a new form of sovereignty that emerged in the waning days of absolute monarchy, one drawing on nascent principles of public health and hygiene, ideas about individual and social development, novel and increasingly expansive knowledges about sexuality, and overlapping forms of law and science to shape life at the levels of both individual and society. Although Foucault saw how such mechanisms might operate in totalitarian regimes—indeed, the specters of Nazism and Stalinism haunt his essays and lectures—his principal concern was the operation of such discourses toward the shaping of population health and vitality in liberal democracies. This scene of emergence

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raises a series of questions: does a context of global citizenship and global flows of capital, commerce, information, goods, and populations disrupt the links between a biopolitical and a bourgeois order? In other words, in a deterritorialized world that is both riven and linked by differential flows of ideas, capital, peoples, and technologies, is the biopolitical model too irrevocably linked to the nation-state to be of much use anymore? Are there better ways to think about life in the twenty-first century?

We are convinced that biopolitics has not outlived its usefulness. Hailing from the fields of literary criticism and history, we find a number of ways in which the biopolitical is an important frame with an enduring influence. Yet the study of life in the humanities and the qualitative social sciences has developed such that biopolitics alone is no longer sufficient. As the essays in this issue demonstrate, we live and think in an era that is *after* biopolitics: one in which the idea of biopolitics will remain a part of meditations about life, but which will call for other frames for conceptualizing life. To capture this understanding, we want to suggest that biopolitics not only survives these shifts but also that survival inheres in biopolitics, that there is no concept of life in biopolitics that is not, at the same time, a notion of survival. For this reason, among others, the “after” of this volume’s title can be heard to resonate with the *sur* of survival and the history of thinking about living as living on among those who have and have not reflected on biopolitics by name.

Foucault’s description of a bio-power of populations—in which a sovereign state would deploy scientific knowledge toward the end of broadly influencing life on a grand scale—emerged in a moment of fascination about human rights. With roots in Hannah Arendt’s reflections on the place of humanity in the aftermath of totalitarianism, Foucault’s thought—and, later, that of Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, and others—engaged with the affiliation of citizenship to human rights, the relationship between the individual and the state, the role of dignity as both a legal and a rhetorical concept in the making of the human, and the resilience of fictional biologies, marked at the intersection of the human sciences and the administration of populations. These were long-term historical developments, beginning by some accounts at the foundation of a Western legal tradition in the classical world, by others in the late nineteenth century. But even the terms of this frame long predate Foucault, with the French psychiatrist Edouard Toulouse (1929: 13) advocating the development of a “biocracy,” or “a state that would be directed by the life sciences,” as early as 1929. Several essays in this issue engage directly with this conceptualization of biopolitics, while linking its historical development to contemporary concerns. Invoking the develop-

ment of an organicist social science at the foundation of the modern humanist disciplines, the place of dignity in the determination of citizenship, and the links between individual illness and social pathology, these essays address how a biopolitical frame continues to offer important lessons for the history of science, the legal paradoxes of the republic, and the writing of inequality on the contemporary body.

Yet, far from a “politics of life itself,” this imagining of biopolitics has profound limitations: in most scholarship, the biopolitical has remained an extraordinarily human-centered endeavor. We now live in an era marked by emergent rights discourses that extend far beyond the human, even though humans are thoroughly implicated in their articulation. One productive site for expanding these boundaries of a human biopolitics is the notion of the Anthropocene. Unknown fifteen years ago, the concept has become unavoidable in the physical, social, and human sciences. As defined by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (2002: 23), the Anthropocene is a descriptor of a new geological era in which humans have become the primary force shaping the earth’s geophysical, atmospheric, and ecological conditions. As such, it is a logical space of inquiry for exploring the overlaps between the political science of population and environmental change. Three of the essays in this issue operate at this intersection, or, as Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr might argue, this ecotone. Where does the “natural” end, and where does the “human” begin? How can we imagine the coupling of human and natural systems as a site for exploring those categories that are fundamental to the development of the modern political subject, including global capitalism, gender distinction, an entropic understanding of human social evolution, and the transition of the natural world from a repository of fear to a space of domination? Animal sovereignty is another critical space for evaluating the limits and promise of biopolitics. Can a theoretical frame designed for exploring the modern state apply to “a state of nature”? Is there such a thing as a possible politics of animal life itself, and if so, what resemblances might it share with a human-centric biopolitics?

This issue forces both a conversation about such possibilities and a clearer articulation of what biopolitics can do. It engages broad questions about the history of the concept and mobilization of life toward the ends of the state; about the operation and place of life across political, social, cultural, and aesthetic discourses; and about links among discourses of life, the human, the animal, and the ecological, as well as the political or ethical subject. In a political context in which a differential value of life—black, queer, female, human, animal, fetal—remains fundamental, and in which the future of life

itself is in question, the concepts and forms through which we imagine life are more important than ever. After biopolitics is the moment at which these questions of living, far from exhausted, linger. After biopolitics, we continue to engage with the complexities and potential of this critical frame, even in all of its limitations.

Note

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