



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>  
*Scholarly journals online*

# LEAVING POLITICS

## BIOS, ΖΩĒ, LIFE

LAURENT DUBREUIL

We live politics, which is not only the far horizon of shared existence, an inventory of techniques, a subject of discussion between scholars. We live it in our gestures, words, experiences, feelings, and attitudes. Life, politics are bound to each other; the evidence speaks to us from the entrenched camp of a university campus to a hermitage deep in the forest. But as to whether or how to articulate life and politics, no sooner is the question raised than we intuit their relation. And with this more questions arise: is it even accurate to make a *difference* between political practice and the course of life? Are these substances distinct? If so, do they converge at a single point in “public” or “private” space? There are no clear answers. In our times, a model of intrication is expressed more and more. Biopolitics has become the new catchword on the intellectual scene. Biopolitics would complicate yet again the relation between life and the City, for it seems to integrate *bios* into the City. It is an operation of force, in which something from life finds itself confiscated, stamped with a disfiguring seal. The tone of pathos in my preamble, before the more philosophical words to which this article will also give voice, is intended to reproduce the strike force of certain audacious propositions, with their evocation of destruction. Here I am thinking especially of Giorgio Agamben, whose *Homo Sacer* series continues to provoke great controversy. Among the responses Agamben incites is the recent work of Roberto Esposito, the subject of this issue of *Diacritics*. I want to take this occasion to return to the relations between life and politics—in the strange light of our contemporary debates on the junction *bio-politics*.

Facing a field poised to become a quasi-specialty of research, I will limit myself to an almost nothing, to the simple fringe, to these few employed, repeated, pooled words: *bios*, *polis*, *vita*, *zōē*. Something other than a terminology or lexicography is in play. For the deliberations of Agamben or Esposito render an immediate and crucial importance to language in the elucidation of their categories. But what these authors make language say merits a supplementary examination. Their use of substantives, their solicitation of textual events, contain a philosophical program that informs their thoughts on biopolitics—beyond or other than what is recognized at times. In its epistemic reach, the present text is a critical inquiry into certain recourses to language, to idioms, and the way they contradictorily qualify present-day biopolitics. The theoretical problem takes a strange turn in the historical reconstitution given by Agamben, for whom the two Greek words *bios* and *zōē* render an account of things by now obscure or lost. A comparable difficulty arises from the confrontation of discourses assembled by Esposito. Both authors begin by analyzing the contemporary, both dress their works in a philology that cuts through history. This crossing of disciplines, and its value in the exposition of political philosophy, constitutes another face of my intended exploration.

Situated by languages, placed among disciplines, biopolitics can be interrogated as well for the articulation it designates. Biopolitics appears to be revelatory of a political ambition more widespread than in the immediate exacerbation of biometrics or geographics. In order to clear a way for myself through textual territories, I will follow above all the impulsion of two words, and those they “engender”—*bios* and *zōē*. These terms are Greek. In themselves alone they exercise a formidable effect in the work of Agamben.

While more discreet in Esposito's, still they return. Shall we then conclude that Greek speaks in us, that politics is best expressed from its Hellenic origins? Not necessarily. But, requiring neither return nor origin, certain configurations of the Greek corpus seem to repeat themselves almost identically. Everything depends upon the *almost*, of course, which facilitates the transition from one text to another, in one sense or the other. My anxiety in regards to biopolitics is thus linked to the *bios*, to the *zōē*, to the *polis*, to their proliferation in both Antiquity and the present—two eras from which may come, by anachronism, several supplementary readings, be they of the “canonical” Aristotle. Thus we must begin with the introduction of the first *Homo Sacer*, wherein Agamben presents a semantic distribution he declares to be crucial.

### Bios Is Zōē and Zōē Is Bios<sup>1</sup>

“The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word ‘life.’ They used two terms [. . .]: *zōē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” [1/3]. These two sentences, which open Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, have since popularized a “Greek” distinction at the very heart of life, a distinction that would have been lost. According to Agamben, Greek suggests an opposition between the “simple, natural life” and a “particular way of life” [1/3], “life in general and the qualified way of life proper to men” [66/76], “private life and political existence” [187/209–10]. *Zōē*, the first term, would refer us back to life in nature, common to life in general, which the human becoming would have to convert into qualified life: into *eu zēn* (the good life<sup>3</sup>), *suzēn* (living-with), in short, *bios politikos*. At best, *zōē* arises from *oikos*, a more circumscribed space than the one of the City.

This conceptual structure would be paired with the operation of Greek semantics, Athenian democracy, and classical political reflection (in particular that of Plato and Aristotle). Modernity has called into question the difference, the gap between *zōē* and *bios*. Historically speaking, “the decisive fact” consists in that “*bios* and *zōē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction” [9/12] that founds totalitarian biopolitics in the West.

Agamben's analysis is notorious. I reference it so as to underline the extent to which the linguistic hypothesis remains in solidarity with the entire demonstrative movement of the trilogy *Homo Sacer*. The effective separation between mere life and political existence is conferred on us by the words of the Greeks. This point is by now widely accepted. On the web, the correlation between *zōē* and *bios* yields a large number of responses. The two Greek terms have become veritable signal-words, cited often without explicit reference to *Homo Sacer*. Their presence hallows an exemplary success in the diffusion of ideas that owes to Agamben. However, he merely *popularized* the terms, as is evidenced by his introductory references to Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. The second is invoked for his conclusion to *The Will to Knowledge* and the courses he led at the Collège de France on biopolitics. Arendt appears as one who restores the effaced difference. In *The Human Condition* we read in effect that *bios* is situated “in opposition to the simple *zōē*,” and proves thus to be “specifically human life” [97].<sup>4</sup>

---

1. Some elements of this first part have already been published in French, under the title “*De la vie dans la vie: sur une étrange opposition entre zōē et bios*” in *Labyrinthe: Atelier interdisciplinaire* 22 (2005): 47–52. The present version has been amended and revised.

2. Page references will list English edition first, original second.

3. Cf. commentaries in *Homo Sacer* 2, 7/4, 10.

4. Arendt's sentence is a bit ambiguous, so it is hard to determine whether she believes the distinction to be “Greek” or Aristotelian.

The interplay between  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$  and *bios* was remarked upon much earlier by Greek speakers. The grammarians proposed two notable theories to explain the competition in terms. For some, the *distinguo* would be related to duration and continuity. *Bios* would be “the time of  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ ,”<sup>5</sup> a portion of it. Some other authors proposed the inverse repartition. The second explanation lies at the origin of Arendt’s words, as of Agamben’s and their followers’. For Ammon of Alexandria, “*bios* is appropriate to animals of reason [*logikon*  $\zeta\delta\omicron\omicron$ ], that is, to human beings only;  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$  to human beings and animals without reason.”<sup>6</sup> We must note as well that the philologist uses Aristotle’s distinctions without wondering whether the reasonable use preferred by the Stagirite is relevant for the *entire* Greek language. Let us add that other grammarians believed *a contrario* that *bios* had been the term reserved for nonrational animals. Obviously, each of the two constructions relies on more or less convincing examples.

Arendt remains evasive as to why she opts for one justification over another. It is not certain that she means to refer to *one* usage of Greek; she moreover cites Aristotle in support. Without doubt the distribution *bios*/ $\zeta\delta\epsilon$  has some consistency in the philosopher’s writings. But it would be overly hasty to believe, in regard even to Aristotle, that *bios* is “specifically human” or “political.” Take, for example, the phrase “living [ $\zeta\epsilon\eta$ ] the life [*bion*] of a plant.”<sup>7</sup> One reads as well that “the differences among animals [ $\zeta\delta\omicron\omicron$ ] are relative to their lives [*bíous*], their characteristics, and their organs.”<sup>8</sup> Certainly in the two occurrences one will object that Aristotle did not intend to repeat, after  $\zeta\delta\omicron\omicron$ , the related word  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ ; but to explain this approximation by way of a single stylistic concern is hardly convincing. It could be that the recourse to *bios* (for a *plant*) is due to the *internal limitations* of Greek, in which the verb *bioō* is “practically never used in the present tense” “in Attic Greek.”<sup>9</sup> This would preclude the syntagm “to live [*bioun*] the life [ $\zeta\delta\epsilon\eta$ ] of a plant.” Here I have just transposed the solution onto an analogous problem proffered by Agamben, that is, the theoretically troubling expression  $\zeta\delta\omicron\omicron$  *politikon*. But the rarity of certain forms of *bioō* remains to be proven; and in any case there exists another verb of the same “root,” *bioteuō*. One finds it in Aristotle’s description of birds that do not fly but “live [*bioteuousin*] near water”:<sup>10</sup> *bios* and not  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ . In fact, one could follow Agamben (more than one can Arendt) on the degree of *qualification*. Aristotle has perhaps the tendency to place *bios* more on the side of particular life (vegetable or aquatic existence in the city) and  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$  on the general. One would have the play between a marked substantive and an unmarked one, linguistically speaking. But in no case can *bios* be *reserved* to either humans or political practice. Finally, Aristotle is not the entire Greek corpus.

A useful truism to repeat. When he contrasts *bios* and  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ , Aristotle inscribes himself within a discursive tradition. We will draw upon only one diplopic example. In the second chorus of *Heracles*, Euripides invents a moral *postmortem* in which the good people, having arrived at the end of their years, are offered a second chance, while the bad are to be punished by a death without return. Two verses convey the improbable gnome: “villainy

---

5. I am using the clarifications provided by the *Thesaurus Graecae linguae at the end of the Bios article [see Estienne]. To add something to the dictionary, let us specify that the hypothesis is particularly developed by the Greek commentators of Hippocrates. Cf. Scholia: Hippocratem and Galenum 2: 246, 248. All translations from classical languages are the author’s.*

6. *Ammonius Alexandrinus, De adfinium vocabulorum differentia, §100. The same distribution is found in the Bios article of works of the same era, such as of Herennius Philo, De diversis verborum significationibus.*

7. *Aristotle, De generatione animalium [2.3.736b].*

8. *Aristotle, Historia animalium [1.1.487a].*

9. *Agamben, Homo Sacer 2/5. Agamben cites bioō in its middle voice and infinitive form, biounai.*

10. *Aristotle, Historia animalium [1.1.487a]. Ammonius gives a new distinction between bioō and bioteuō, which is no more relevant than the first one.*

would have only one life [*bioton*] in life [*zoas*].”<sup>11</sup> *Zoas* is a delicate genitive to elucidate; he literally says, “one life’s life,” or “one life of life.” Translators have often chosen to see in it a single intensity and discard the doubling. I choose ambiguity; that is, one life would be *of* life, the life’s life, because *in* life. *Bios* is a portion, or the subcase, of *zōē*, somewhat as with Aristotle. Let us hasten to cite another phrase, one that indicates the exact and dynamic inverse. Here is a bit from Plato, who, in the *Timaeus*, imagines a psychic migration proximate to Euripides’s chorus. He mentions a soul which “spent a lame life throughout life” [44c]—final exchange of terms, in which this time *bios* denotes life in general, and *zōē*, a singular lifetime.

If it is our intention to render coherent these disparate elements (and must we?), we should hardly know how to get beyond situating the most general tendencies and the most particular, keeping in mind that the roles are not distributed in advance. A specific *tongue* has its structures and its laws, but it is not an external or absolute datum: discourse can reinvent it in a singular manner, which is what Euripides, Plato, or Aristotle did. Agamben, who substantiates an Alexandrine conjecture undertaken by Arendt, is well within his rights to attach a conceptual content to *zōē*, and inversely another one to *bios*. In so doing, he participates in the Socratic moment when the philosopher went to visit the everyday citizens of Athens so as to redefine together the language they spoke. So the difficulty comes not so much from the philosophical process than from its linguistic and historico-political justification. Agamben simplifies Aristotle’s texts, and then dissolves them into the grandiose entity of “the Greeks.” Embedded in the unfounded argument from authority is a network of unspoken motives, which we must expose, then denounce. Even while he anchors the entire “political existence” in language (*logos*<sup>12</sup>), Agamben remains deaf to the semantic phenomena in *tongue*. Significance can occur within a discourse in which *bios* and *zōē* assume values that respond to one another, that complete or critique each other—far from the indexation of closed and rational meanings.

The deceptive equivalence between the conceptual clarification of definition and the uses of utterance or discourse leads us to the lexical underpinning of political analysis. The alleged solidarity among words, City, and philosophy cannot but astound. The end of *Homo Sacer* reads like the workings of a character backstage: “today *bios* lies in *zōē* exactly as essence, in the Heideggerian definition of Dasein, lies (*liegt*) in existence” [188/210]. More than that, Agamben joins Heidegger in the affirmation that “the Greek tongue, and it alone, is *logos*” [Heidegger 44, trans. modified]. To understand the political *logos* requires us to move in the direction of the philosophical *Ursprache* that is Greek. The idiom rings in unison with the real: two different words designate two different things (naked life, political life). Agamben apparently situates the dissolution at the end of Antiquity, whereas for Heidegger the upset dates from Socrates. Another modification: in Freiburg, the Hellenic celebration includes praise of a language “in unison with being,” whereas in Venetia the modern blurring of the ancient duality is deplored. But in both cases history is a metaphysical process beginning with the loss of the Greek—and true—*Urgrund*.

By inscribing his project *ab ovo* in the Greek *tongue*, Agamben runs the philological risks already noted. According to the protocols for proof in *Homo Sacer*, lexical counterexamples mar a large part of the support. In fact, the supposedly novel element of the modern era (this “irreducible indistinction” between *bios* and *zōē*) is authorized only by an imaginary reification of, say, *linguaggio* and *lingua*. Despite the status it appears to merit in the political *logos*, the idiom is accordingly, and exemplarily, reduced to a distribution of meanings stripped of their motility, of even their *life*—in all possible senses. The assertion here of a “sole” word for *life* might merit today an additional remark. To contend that a single substantive exists corresponds no more to indifference than the ex-

11. Euripides, *Hercules*, v. 663–64.

12. Cf. analyses in Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 7/10–11.

istence of parasyonyms may be confused with a “clear” or obvious distribution. Are we all in agreement on “what *we* mean by the word ‘life?’” [*Homo Sacer* 1/3, my emphasis]. Did Michel Henry, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida, each contemporary and French, share the way in which they heard the term? The “single term” [*Homo Sacer* 1/3] is thus diffracted as well. It is troubling to note that Agamben hardly explains the current confusion regarding this lexical unicity, and for good reason; the chronology of biopolitical events would lose its contemporary character if allied, for example, with the emergence of the Latin *vita* and its successors. This is to say that Agamben has cause to protect the state of exception that inheres in a Greek experience, in which the adequation of language to situation would be *historically revelatory*.

### *Concept and Signification*

The impasses in Agamben’s thought provide occasion to reflect upon the ways we make use of disciplines. The most troubling in *Homo Sacer* derives undoubtedly from the peculiar connection between philosophy and other disciplines—above all, philology and history. Here, “history” means more or less “beginning,” or origin. One returns to the Greeks so as to plunge into the causality of the past. I readily accept a correlation, a strong one, between Athens and a large number of countries in the present. But the idea of a lineage leading from Greco-Roman Antiquity to Europe and the United States is highly suspect. Agamben deplores the break in this line, the event that bypasses the (illusory) bipolarity of *bios* and *zōē* in favor of the false unity of *life*. Just after he insists on this break in the present day, he postulates the possibility of a direct heritage. Playing on these two planes, Agamben eludes simple temporal linearity—so widely criticized following Nietzsche—to reestablish it as a virtual countermodel: contemporary politics would have yet retained its glorious Hellenic distinction had it known to adhere more faithfully to Aristotle.

The present accession to indistinction has effected a *bifurcation* in the first trajectory. This discontinuity has rendered all the more palpable the prestige of origin, according to which all is judged. So it follows that history is precisely a *fall* out of the initial paradise. A similar image emerges from biblical accounts of the Creation whereby human mobility corresponds to the loss of Eden. Agamben thus convokes two major paradigms in his understanding of the unfolding of time: history is produced in its emergence from the origin, and it is also a linear narrative that has deviated. The rupture has to do with both a theology of the fall from grace and a poetics of the discontinued event. We can easily see that Agamben not only borrows from Foucault the term *biopolitics* but also appropriates the sense of history as a broken line. But Agamben recovers to some degree the Heideggerian side of Foucault.<sup>13</sup> Historical and local fractures are the hypostasis of an originary fissure in the origin.

To the extent that it is discipline, the history Agamben practices also mimics Foucault’s demonstrations. We find in it the same tendency toward erudition. Agamben confirms philosophy’s need to draw henceforth from other discourses of knowledge, as does Foucault. Erudition is transformed into an authoritative apparatus. From the moment that uncertainty (whether it be the lack of distinction typical to the era, or the relativity of science) threatens the solidity of theoretical discourse, authority is sought in the administration of proof. The protocol thus adopted copies philological and historical scholarship: accumulation of *facts*, enactment of a unitary rule, and liquidation of counterexamples (disqualified as errors of interpretation or insignificant aberrations). Agamben’s erudition is not so much for the purpose of “respecting sources” as to bring a scientific apparatus to the philosophical core of his thesis. Foucault, with more endurance and more footnotes,

---

13. Cf. Foucault, *Dits et écrits* 4: 703: “Heidegger a toujours été pour moi le philosophe essentiel [Heidegger has always been for me the essential philosopher].” See also 780.

proceeds similarly. Agamben, less encumbered with formalities, has greater recourse to philological scholarship than to the breakdown, collection, and analysis of archives. In this he evinces another of Heidegger's tendencies, whereby a thorough familiarity with classical languages in no way precludes the pronouncement of hazardous hypotheses. The valorization of Greek thus plays into an overall strategic approach. The number of readers capable of verifying case by case the arguments surrounding the Hellenic corpus is proportionally as slight as the risk of contesting any of these. Any divergent argument—including the one I have just proposed—will find itself prey to enormous difficulties. For even had I multiplied the examples, *a priori* the objection as formulated is hardly more credible for non-Hellenists. Finally, as I have stressed, linguistic competence can lead to entirely other conclusions than my own; the Alexandrians were playing this game. In short, in the time of one reading, objection runs the risk of neutralization. "Responsible" scholars would not want to chance decision and would suspend their judgment. Agamben's philology suggests disciplinary procedures, but it is *foremost* intended for the readers who do not possess the means of verification—even more so since the cited texts are commented upon rather evasively, the selection unduly chosen, and the grammatical conventions occulted. Agamben's is a philology for show, in sum, which weakens in advance the possibility for debate. Everything becomes incontestable: the necessary dialogic and contradictory movement of human sciences is thus stopped.

Interdisciplinarity takes on meaning only when interpretations show the tensions internal to knowledge, and when the elements harvested are given the possibility of an explanation. Agamben rushes his liminal argument through a few pages, curbs his examples as much as possible, and presents the philological argument in a monolithic manner. In addition to disallowing his public a rudimentary knowledge of the problems associated with language, he blocks the interdisciplinary practice he purports to perform. Norms treating philological and historical scientificity are detached from the disciplines as discursive and collective ensembles. Instead of an intersection between knowledges, we find isolated practices whose legitimacy is as yet untested—this in order to better seat the author's philosophical reflection. The argument from authority that history (the "first time") and the erudition of classical studies (the disjunction between *bios* and *zōē*) provide is required by a conceptual speech seeking external support but fearing any *confrontation* with another discourse.

Revisiting the fictional opposition between *bios* and *zōē* consequently helps us to qualify Agamben's philosophical act. Ours is not a matter of reestablishing the truth, but rather one of divesting the crow of his peacock feathers, as in Aesop. Finally we must emphasize the repercussions of a thought riveted upon the origin and dedicated to its eventual rupture. The fact that *zōē* has never uniquely signified bare or animal life calls into question, beyond all else, the fable of a biopolitical happening and, at the least, contests the account of its current practice.

It would nonetheless be unfortunate to renounce the possibility of an encounter among discrete types of knowledge, and altogether too convenient to simply disqualify the concept of *biopolitics* for reasons of the usage that stressed anew its study. It becomes precisely all the more necessary to rethink the articulation between *life*, *bios*, *zōē*, and *politics*—which involves no less than care for textual specificities and charted events.

Situated along this vein is Roberto Esposito, whose book *Bios* deploys an altogether different thesis than Agamben's. In responding, most often allusively, to the philosophical reinauguration of biopolitics expressed by his compatriot, Esposito displaces the problem in three salutary ways. First, *Bios* modifies the historical markers of the usage of the word *biopolitics* and uncovers its traces before Foucault. Esposito's introductory mention of the works of Morley Roberts in 1938 or Aaron Starobinski in 1960<sup>14</sup> exceeds simple

---

14. See Esposito, *Bios* 9–10. (NB: on p. 10, Starobinski's first name is misspelled as "Aroon.")

anecdotal precision. It allows for the collective construction of a category underneath that of the tutelary duo signaled by Agamben (Foucault and Arendt). This chronological reconfiguration precludes the privileging of one type of given cognitive filial relationship. From there Esposito is more in line to return to the (post-)Foucauldian intricacy between *biopolitics* and *biopower*. Finally, the circuit through the canon of political theory favors an abandonment of the Johannic posture that Agamben so effortlessly adopts. There is in *Bios* neither apocalyptic visions<sup>15</sup> nor faith in the primordial nature of logos, as respun in the *in principio erat verbum* (in the beginning was the word) of the evangelist.

While Esposito's approach assumes the false air of a classical history of philosophy, the work goes beyond the compilation of philosophical doctrines. The evocation of the predecessors takes the form of a progressively critical and reflective recuperation. Esposito renounces the objectivist projection of an exterior observer. He marks the sites of passage, the moments of contact between texts that can rely upon the same sort of analysis, all while endowing contrary values to the facts they describe.

Esposito advances by way of underlining differences and relationships within those texts conducive to correlation without prefigured subsumption. The problematic displacements defined earlier and the precision of this mode of exposition lend hope that *bios* and *zōē* might be led back to a whole body of works rather than frozen into a linguistic ontology. When, in the first chapter, Esposito evokes the "Greek lexicon," he specifies "in particular the one of Aristotle."<sup>16</sup> Afterwards, he limits himself to considering *bios* as "qualified life," "form of life" [4], disregarding the additional consideration of a humanity. Elsewhere he cites the two Greek words as having arisen from the "classical Aristotelian partition" [55]. Both times *Aristotelian* might refer as much to the tradition borne by Aristotle as to the Stagirite himself. And even though the philosopher did not make these substantives contrast in a unique and rigid manner, the fact remains that the Alexandrian grammarians I referenced above are very much the inheritors of the Lyceum's teaching. In the care he takes to distinguish between the Greek tongue and Aristotelian practice, Esposito undoes the history-catastrophe that opens and closes *Homo Sacer*. In the remainder of *Bios*, the contrasted occurrences of *bios* and *zōē* refer more often to their current use. It is because he critiques Arendt that Esposito designates, in the phenomenon of birth, a "maximal distance" between "*zōē*" and "*bios*" [196], a frontal opposition (cf. "that opposes [*bios*] frontally to *zōē*" [196]). A bit later, he will qualify this "Arendtian caesura [. . .] between life and the condition of existence" as "already Heideggerian" [196]. On this point he challenges the idea of a "reduction of *bios* to *zōē*—or to 'bare existence'" [153]. Quoted indirectly, *Homo Sacer* seems to describe a resurgence of the couple of Greek words. Because Esposito's recourse to the *bios/zōē* bipolarity is systematically tied to the texts that have elaborated upon it, the privilege held by the Greek language finds itself evacuated. In all probability Esposito would rather be skeptical before the natural validity of such an opposition. Caution is less in the philological order than the philosophical. In the wake of Derrida, Esposito tries more than once to approach the discrepancy in differential terms. Thus does he discern in Nietzsche "the point of precipitation of a biopolitics of death and the horizon, hardly sketched, of a new politics of life" [114]—that is, "affirmative biopolitics" [214]. In another work, *Categorie dell'impolitico*, Esposito states similarly that "the impolitical is not diverse from the political" [xx]. As to *zōē* and *bios*, Esposito modifies the articulation he feigned to recognize. He corrects, for example, Agamben's version of Nazi biopolitics by writing: "one should speak of the spiritualization of *zōē* and of the biologization of the spirit" [*Bios* 153]. Throughout Esposito repeats the word "*biologization*," in which *bios* comes to assume the place of *zōē* as mere life, or

---

15. The final words of *Homo Sacer* are "risking an unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe" [188] ("rischio di una catastrofe biopolitica senza precedenti" [211]).

16. *Bios* 4. All quotations from Esposito have been translated by the author of the article.

simple animal life. Even the title, *Bios*, becomes a supplementary means by which to alter the distribution between *bios* and  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ .

The reflection thus recovers something of the semantic inflection at work in Euripides or Plato. But Esposito succeeds only by occulting the very term  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ . The work is entitled *Bios*, and not *Bio-*, which would have implied a productivity of the affix in modern languages. The name of the book is, after all, Greek. In this way Esposito continues a series of references to Antiquity [see his *Immunitas* and *Communitas*]; and again he rejoins Agamben, whose trilogy *Homo Sacer* is scored with indexed concepts on ancient languages. Yet if a concept of life may be placed in *bios*, in the name of what can we avoid, or void,  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ ?

Tactician without a doubt, and markedly unlike his contemporary, Esposito prefers not to harp on a lexical disagreement. But does the induction of  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$  in *bios* not reproduce the hierarchical dichotomy suggested by both Arendt and Agamben (*human life* > *naked life*)? Rather than a face-to-face opposition, we find henceforth a differential characterization; yet the *sense* of the value remains identical. Under the name of *bios*, a unification is in process that has nothing to do with Greek vocabulary. The rare references to the Hellenic philosophical corpus respect the double side of signification (there are *bios* and  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ ), and limit the opposition to a (post-)Aristotelian operation. But the innumerable resurgences of *bios* throughout the text serve above all to dispense of  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ . Facing a Greek particularity in relation to the Roman and Anglo-Saxon languages, Agamben opted for a bipolar rationalization, whereas Esposito tends to erase the cumbersome supernumerary. *Bios*, from beginning to end, contains  $\zeta\delta\epsilon$  as internal difference, which is as much as to say that Esposito's subtle games between idioms are in the last analysis sustained by *one synthetic* term. The Greek language is exhumed in order to be sacrificed a second time, and on the altar of the concept. Again we meet the entire problem of lingual signification. We must strongly suspect the tacit relationship Esposito establishes between discourse and concept. The introduction of *Bios* situates the major stakes of the question, "not only what does it mean, but when was it born, the concept of biopolitics?" [xii]. The will of philosophical reconstruction in historical decentering is obvious here. The difficulty arises in the enunciation of biopolitics as *concept*. For the last is immediately glossed as one "lexical vein" in "a line of discourse" [xii]. So, *vocable* or *concept*? The concern with lexical veins should lead to the title *Bios and Zōē*, or *Bio-*. Or the lexicon bears concepts in the latent state, most often incompletely formed—until the arrival of the philosopher, who at last polishes the words. The learned one would come at the end of the line, recuperating that which the speaker sensed only confusedly and discarding the dregs ( $\zeta\delta\epsilon$ , for example). If contemporary philosophy has recognized the place of language and of *la-langue* in conceptual construction, then the relationship sketched by Esposito seems a bit brief. The odyssey of the concept within discourse replaces the odyssey of the Spirit in the real. Both ride a slope that skittishly evades points of aberrancy, in the event of which speech is transformed into a more or less imperfect actualization of concepts that the philosopher alone must consolidate.<sup>17</sup>

Esposito moves without warning from Nietzsche to Charles Richet, from *Dracula* to the Nazi treatises on racial hygiene. The comparison of the incomparable must be understood as decisive to research in the "human sciences" or "humanities." And still we should be careful to specify the name of that in which one would attempt the angel's leap. In *Bios*, all scruples as to method are effaced by the omnipresence of the concept. Then it becomes possible to move from literature to medicine to political organization, for these discourses share a lexicon, and *therefore* concepts. It is the *therefore* that I refuse. The homage Esposito generously pays Foucault reveals one of the greatest difficulties of the

---

17. While the "category" of which Esposito speaks often appears to be a local actualization, anchored in a discourse and a context, it derives finally from the concept's inclusion. See for instance the relation between plural and singular in the title *Categorie dell'impolitico*.

author of *The Order of Things* (*Les Mots et les choses*). On the same subject of discursive collision among disciplines, we were saying that Agamben enhanced the effect of authority and the pomp of scientificity marked in Foucault. In Esposito, we are confronted in plain sight with what an analysis of discourse can harbor. That which is enunciated is detached from its enunciation, from its project, from its place in discursive registers, from its potential performativity, and so on. To the extent that a law and a novel may encounter each other, so *the gap between them requires as attentive an accounting*. At the end of *The Order of Things*, Foucault distinguishes a trihedral of knowledge whence “the human sciences are excluded” [347/358]. Constituting neither a new dimension nor a surface, they belong to a “cloudy distribution” [347/359]. Deviating slightly, I would say that the analysis of discourse displays its objects identically; it organizes them with no depth. An analogous method brings to the surface unexpected convergences and divergences that are at times revelatory. The strategy remains, however, a reductive one if it neglects in advance the macrodifference between a book of medicine, a samizdat, and a thesis. The resort to *discourse* makes *tongues*, *language*, and *speech* objectively disappear: in other terms, one simply eludes what makes discourse *possible*.

In his return to a concept removed from the internal plurality supposedly inherent in episteme, Esposito distinguishes himself from Foucault. Reinhart Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* (“conceptual history”) is explicitly evoked in the recent preface to the new edition of *Categorie dell’impolitico* [vii]. The same move, in sum. Seized in time, discourse expresses the history of the concept. Thus texts are transformed into linguistic supports. This leads to the double postulation of a concept that would act *upon* the social—and of enunciation as transparent medium. Koselleck maintains that “it has been possible to form concepts that have liberated new realities.”<sup>18</sup> Let us note it is the *concept* that liberates. Analogously, the final segment of *Bios*, carrying the title of “Philosophy of *bios*,” presents the future of biopolitics as conditioned “by the manner in which *contemporary thought* will follow its tracks” [215, my emphasis]. This conclusive *thought* restores power to the concept *as such*. It definitively clarifies any hesitation regarding the “lexical vein”: the lexicon bears meaning only in function of the concept that commands it. Because the “living must be thought of in the unity of life” [214–15], because there is conceptual unity, Esposito has finally nothing whatever to do with the word *ζῶε*.

Now I would like to propose that a single substantive is no more the guarantor of a unique signification than two terms may indicate a constant and predefined allocation of meaning. And right away I’ll correct that. After all, Esposito is not seeking signification at all but *the sense of the concept*, patiently constructed by the history of usages he uncovers and by the history he is composing. If it is a question of *reading* texts, evidence accumulates, inexhaustibly so: signification does not come about by discontinuous words but by their conflagration. As for the *life* in *tongue*, it is not a pure concept, on occasions preformed or corrupt: it is at each moment reelaborated in enunciation. That one meaning can be settled and in common would be plausible (although such a settlement would be minimal and in general misleading), if not for the fact that this very meaning finds its value in the excess that enables it. To say “life”—if it is a question of saying it—undoes the definitive, even to the point—particularly in literature—of fracturing conceptuality. When Euripides maintains life in life, he is already threatening the efforts of semantic investigation; he shows, moreover, that life differs from life, such that the living *materiality of the idiom* procures a signifying difference. Esposito is, in turn, precariously positioned, for he has neglected the process of signification.

As regards methodology, textual reading is directed by and toward the *philosophical*—a *telos* for the book. Esposito seeks to reground this knowledge within a polytechnic perspective. The history of philosophy aligns itself with the history of law or of medicine;

18. Koselleck, “*Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte*” 107. Quotation translated by the author.

yet it would be less than accurate to see this as a particular privilege of the historical discipline. What is true for history is true for philology. Held to be crucial, they are yet rectified in the meaning of the concept. In this, Esposito indeed converges with Agamben. Multidisciplinary scholarship yields to *philosophy* as early as the work's subtitle. The venture reterritorializes a vast textual continent rather than assembling procedures, protocols. The Foucauldian archaeologist of *discourses* begets a *dé-disciplinarisation* that takes place to the benefit of philosophy—and with absolute sincerity in Esposito. No one will consequently be astonished that historical studies are few in number, even in the pages consecrated to genocide [see 146 ff.]. The *Begriffsgeschichte*, or the “history of ideas” [Esposito, *Categorie* vii], will in any case be translated into the history of philosophy's renewal, which responds, at a distance, to the wishes formulated by Gilles Deleuze as early as 1968: “the history of philosophy is the reproduction of philosophy itself” [xxi/4]. The historical reach of reproduction in general is kept in suspense, however, if we were to retain Deleuzian terminology. How does one move from one conception to the next? How to refine the *bios*? Indicating several times a skepticism of the grand ruptures à la Foucault (or à la Agamben), Esposito qualifies the “genesis” of biopolitics as “specifically modern” [*Bios* xiii] but declares “one of its roots” to be meanwhile “recognizable also in earlier eras” [xiii]. Does recognition imply a transhistorical ground? We return to the latency of the concept, which would remain nonetheless subsequent to Antiquity.<sup>19</sup> We seem to have dived into biopolitics at the end of the nineteenth century, at a point of junction between politics and medicine. Nietzsche's work reports contrasting virtualities: his is an “extraordinary seismograph” [xiv]. Temporal progression would then be neither a juxtaposition of ruptures nor a simple forward movement, but an accumulation of shock waves automatically swelling in size. This model would suppose a decline of the concept after the acme of Nazism (“in Nazism biopolitics experimented with *the most terrifying form* of historical realization” [160, my emphasis]). The last part of the book does not share this “optimistic” view. In the section on post-Nazism, it is more a question of “interrupting in a definitive manner this terrible thanatopolitical order” [202] by inflecting upon biopolitics a revitalizing affirmation. Hope would not have sense if the seismic image were preserved. I conclude from this that the superlative achievement has unsettled the system of conceptual history. Or again, that Esposito approaches the sequence of thoughts and facts in a nonhomogeneous manner: inexorability, interruptions, deviations. Both hypothetical readings expose the site at which the philosophical concept defaults itself. In the very body of philosophy wherein it desires a place, *Bios* is led back to the constitutive deficiency of the rational exposition of the concept. The system is literally overshot by the infinite it aims to contain. I am not reproaching Esposito (as he does Arendt) for not having “thought in depth” [164]. I am indicating one fissure in philosophy. At the fault line, no other institutionalized knowledge will help Esposito fill in the void, not even to straddle it; for he has deprived himself of the resources of the disciplines. History, absent, will not throw a bridge over the abyss that history reveals.

Esposito stumbles anew on the signification of the historical thickness in the vast body of texts he convokes. The same word can mean something else in reiteration, as different terms may intersect by dint of the alterity that enunciation confers. Texts, constituted in turn by phrases and words, are possibly bound by the same phenomenon. The biopolitical corpus proceeds—apart from or beyond the hermeneutical act of regrouping—from an invariant's variation. In the reiteration of forms, themes, words, schemas, or statements, alterations may arise. Any history of discourse that would deprive itself of the teleological purport of the concept would take seriously the lingual nature of its “object.” Everything is always the same but can be different. This “history” tells of the heterogeneity of the homogenous—

---

19. Cf. in particular the analysis of Plato, *Bios* 51.

paradigms (shock waves, rupture) in the anxiety to cover the defect. To do another kind of history would require an account of each utterance in respect to the performativity of political and legal *paroles*, wherein acts are not indomitably detached from words. This entails a consideration of the site, the force, and the reach of a text beyond its layout on the discursive plane, without which one runs the risk of making “more terrible” the old incarnation of the Hegelian idea: the factual illustration of a treatise or the adventitious horizon of a booklike world.

The condition of this methodical redimensioning would make it possible to perceive the conceptual weakness without, however, stopping there. The *jusqu’aboutist* interdisciplinarity verges on the *indiscipline* to the extent that it continues up to sites of fracture and so passes beyond the procedural limitation of knowing. It is not a question of constructing a patchwork with scraps of knowledge. Rather than falling back upon encyclopedism alone, open to wherever the wind may blow, the *interdiscipline* postulates at once on the infinite and exhibits points of arrest, collision, accidents. By reforming in this way the rich hypotheses of Roberto Esposito, a history bordering on that of the *tongue* would ensue, and from the conceptual fissure would draw the force to continue. Continuation, let us not deceive ourselves, would lead far afield from *Bios* and displace by several removes the problems already askew in *Homo Sacer*. This putative book remains to be written, and will perhaps always remain so.

### *The Multiple Lives of Politics*

At this level of critique, the urgency seems to require something entirely other than a fictive work. Agamben had the merit of investigating the possible relations between politics and life. Esposito closes the inquiry with an appeal to a vital reaffirmation, beyond a mortiferous biopolitics. For Agamben, the present day had been dominated by the renunciation of the Greek bipolarity between *bios* and *zōē*. For Esposito, today’s world has been determined since the beginning of modern times: that is, since we emerged from the reign of Antiquity. What to make of this divide? In Agamben, it fits the apocalyptic representation—but the so-called proof of its reality is missing. Esposito’s approach corresponds finally to a theoretical decoherence. Advancing by anachronism, I would hope to put aside the hypothesis of an absolute rupture, one that *Bios*, we recall, relativized in the span of a page. We will thus conclude with a supplementary collation between the Greek scene and our current one. Rather than remaining with the pure unicity of an isolated era (whether it be the Athenian City or our age of biometric desolation), I opt for a violent shift, which would make the biopolitics in all politics resurface.

So let us read an Aristotle who is neither the holy origin nor the Father; and let us move from *Politics* to *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the latter we find reflection on life and the bonds between citizens. The initial assertions of *Politics* about the *zōon politikon* that is man—those statements so crucial for the entire discussion revamped by Agamben—find there a pendant. We read in fact that “by his nature, man is a political thing,”<sup>20</sup> and that “man is by nature a political thing” [8.9.1169b]. The attribute *politikon* is neutral, which the periphrase “political thing” means to indicate. Neutral: while in these same textual regions disdain for the animal is heard, the qualification of man in *Ethics* is less engaged with his ravaging humanism than in *Politics*. Finally, *politikon* refers directly to the City, the *polis*; and the first formula may be put in these terms: “by nature, man lives in a City.” The anachronism I am hazarding here would not go so far as to confuse society and City, for *polis* includes also the organization of power that extends beyond collective hierarchies.

---

20. Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1.7.1097b. Man is for the nongendered category of anthropos.

If the living animal (*zōon*) is temporarily absent from these axioms, life surges forth—alive and well. I intentionally abbreviated the second sentence, which in its more integral version reads: “man is by nature a political thing *and* he lives with others” [my emphasis]. The *suzēn* is literally a living-with, but to pair it with the Heideggerian *Mitsein* would be misleading. In effect, *suzēn*, in its other uses at the core of *Ethics*, designates a strong community that is marked particularly by friendship, or *philia*. It surely does not designate a relation of coexistence with the Other in general, and refers more to those affective or practical relations that rest upon activities in common. The *specificity* of *suzēn* in regard to the citizenry entails this “and” (*kai*) that in turn relates it to the political. The human being is a member of the City *and* implied in an ensemble of particular associations.

Let us add that *sumbioun* appears in *Ethics* on two occasions, and as a bonus the substantive *sumbios*. The word *sumbioun* is derived from the verb Agamben said was “rare in attic prose.” Twice Aristotle intentionally associates the composite terms *zēn* and *bioun*. In several successive lines, *sumbioun* and *suzēn* designate in an identical manner the sharing of an existence between people;<sup>21</sup> a parallel phenomenon is repeated further on.<sup>22</sup> This can no longer surprise us. All the same, I wanted especially to note these shifts so as to establish that the prefix changes nothing of the lexical oscillation. The interchangeability is evidenced even when Aristotle makes a list of activities that friends can do in common: “some drink together, others play dice together, or together they do sport and they hunt or they philosophize” [9.12.1172a]. “Together” conveys the accumulation of prefixed words in *sun*, which are just as much subcases of *suzēn*, cited at the head of this rubric [9.12.1171b]. At the end of the series, the philosopher synthesizes his description with the formula: “all devoting the days they spend together to what they precisely like in life” [9.12.1172a]. *Life* is *bios* and directly echoes the beginning of this sentence, about the multiple and individual reasons for “living”—wherein “living” was written *zēn*.

We had shown that Agamben’s explanations of the Greek language in general lacked validation in use. The function of Aristotle’s writing teaches us another thing, clearer still after reading Esposito. The Stagirite is not beneath conceptualization when he moves, indeed with insistence, from *bioun* to *zēn* during the course of his text. On the contrary, he confirms the idiomatic organization and articulates a thought that is not riveted to the word but produced in the act of enunciation. Not only does a word not equal a concept; but a concept does not necessarily correspond to *one* word. The concept is not absolutely anterior to language, which would otherwise approximate it. After all, doesn’t Aristotle’s rupture with Platonism begin with his rejection of the theory of Ideas, as mentioned in the introduction to *Ethics*?

I will go further, to risk even an irrevocable divorce with the Aristotelian project. From the moment that the concept is recognized as a construct, as a lingual production, the idea’s fissure is already announced. With signification occurring by way of words, between them, even beyond them, the principle of identity falls down—at least on the lingual level. A substantive can signify other than itself and the same thing as another. An exemption to internal noncontradiction is possible, which threatens to resound in the constitution of the concept at the places of its foreclosure. The implications of what I am sketching complete the critique of unitary rationality in Esposito: it is permitted, with or without proper authorization, by the rereading we were conducting of Aristotle. In any event, we have to face the necessity to retain not only *bios*. Life is expressed *bios-zōē*. Another may read *vita* or *life*, accordingly: life is life *here*, and diverges *there*. But it is time to refuse the edict of *the* underlying concept. On occasion certain *conceptions* may dominate, as, perhaps, “biologization” in Nazism. In no case do they precede, however,

21. Cf. 4.5.1126a and 4.6.1126b.

22. Cf. 10.10.1171a and 10.11.1171a.

or even form, a unitary semantics. Finally, their majority position is evaluated according to minority options, ones they could not obliterate with a single blow.

The accumulation of amicable activities occasions a second remark. No doubt Aristotle considers the final *sumphilosophein* (“philosophize together”) as an occupation superior to the preceding ones (“drink together,” for example). The characterization of *suzēn*—“putting words and thoughts in common”<sup>23</sup>—is eloquent in this regard. However, in the conclusion we cited of the two books consecrated to friendship, the author recognizes *life* to be intrinsically dependent on neither its form nor its content. To live together implies the possible multiplicity of living. I want to reconfigure the argument into a response to one scruple of Esposito’s. The current consensus on the existence of biopolitics seems often to be accompanied by a secret and profound disagreement on the subject of *bios*. In retrospect, besides my serious doubts concerning conceptual communities, I wonder whether the meaning of *bio-* in biopolitics need necessarily be standardized. If Nazism is one biopolitical apogee—or *bio-zōē*-political apogee—did the controlled and annulled life not exceed medical parameters? All those activities listed by Aristotle were also deeply affected by the Third Reich. A certain death was also brought into these lives. Destruction in life, oriented through racial control, entails a ruin beyond the medical or the “biological.” Life is not only life.

Aristotle allows us a final reassessment of the current debate. Here I have insisted: the *suzēn* and *sumbioun* are distinct from politics. And nonetheless they depend on it. The entire first part of *Nicomachean Ethics* maintains the “architectonic” and “sovereign” place of political science inside knowledge [1.1.1094a]. Ethics depends upon politics. The *suzēn* of friends is thus linked to the “living-well,” the *eu zēn* that is the objective of the City in Aristotle’s *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. The political perspective of Aristotelian ethics is renowned. The intention behind its particular, and culminating, case of friendship is without doubt. That is why the types of *philiai* are compared to those of government, why friendship is indispensable among citizens, and so on.<sup>24</sup> In *The Politics of Friendship*, Jacques Derrida fully developed this temptation to inscribe *philia* within politics, in Aristotle and beyond.

And no sooner is this done than the movement is inverted, signing another severance between ethics and politics. Whereas governmental science is by rights superior to moral study, the acquisitions of the latter specify the content of the former. The place held by *philia* in political analysis corresponds to a second influence of ethics upon its necessary condition. In the same respect, “living-together” is facilitated by “living-well”; it even contributes to it, but it does not belong solely to it. In the enumeration evoked earlier, it is obvious that Aristotle does not present as the purpose of the City a continual sharing of occupations, by all and for all. There is no Spartan call to uniformity; Plato’s disciple has no special admiration for Lacedemon and its Republic of similars (*homoioi*). Decidedly, “life-with” does not coincide with *eu zēn*. A life exists, which breaks ranks with politics and is not consigned to the naturalness of the household. From the superposition of politics upon ethics life surges forth.

This ambiguous system evidences a double configuration. Beginning with the necessity of living well, Aristotle makes ethical life depend upon political existence. Because of the primacy of the City-State, full human life exists only *in* the *polis*, *through* politics. The slightest action, the slightest thought, the slightest word, since they imply a collective space, are governed politically. Only the City may lend constituency to *bios* and *zōē*. *At the same time*, the ethical *suzēn* remains in excess to this vital political ground. Life surpasses the frame that “authorizes” it.

---

23. Cf. 4.12.1126b and 9.9.1170b.

24. Cf. 8.10 in its entirety.

In Aristotle, the distribution of forms of lives [1.5.1095b] is intended as an anticipatory response to this *porte à faux*. Yet it only adds a dimension to the edifice. For political life (*bios politikos*) is one of three modes of existence (alongside the movement toward pleasure or theory), man's definition as a living political animal and his natural obligation to seek a life lived well within the City destabilize this new horizontal structure. Apart from the "political life"-form, each human life is already political, according to the phrase (*zōon politikon*). Still in the light of our times, therefore, I propose to interpret the *porte à faux* in a different manner.

Ethical or quotidian *bios-zōē* is constituted by and depends upon the *polis*; human life is *by nature* political; and the *a-polis* man is an "inferior"<sup>25</sup> being. The totality of life, from its nature to its content, from its form to its quality, is coextensive with the political thing. However, friendly or ethical excess comes to contradict the grandeur of the political hold. I want to see in this—both against Aristotle and for him—the underpinnings of a double language. The Stagirite, imperturbable laudator of Athens, celebrates a total *polis* that governs all life, and all of life. Then with one unexpected gesture he designates an *outside*, a space where life exceeds life. Whereas he announces the political totality of life, he denounces this totality by opening a vital outside field.

So I return to the grammar of the contemporary debate. It may be that the state of technology, the influence of medicine, and technocratic engineering produce a government of beings incommensurate with the totalizing endeavor I have just described. In the perspective of *Bios*, the fact that "politics is characterized as *intrinsically* biopolitical" [xiii] may remain more modern than ancient. On the other hand, the second part of what creates biopolitics for Esposito ("life [. . .] *immediately* translatable into politics" [xiii]) is completely in place in Aristotle. We can understand Esposito's resolve to give rise to a novelty, to mark a caesura. But if it is conceivable to follow him in his analysis of the mechanization and manipulation of the living, biopolitics today will never be more than a reinforced extension of the total relation between politics and life, as it was described by Aristotle. Politics adjusted the intensity of its control by cultivating an alliance with *bio-*; but its Aristotelian qualification has not been radically altered. Even were we to extend and reform Esposito's proofs in the directions I have sketched, biopolitics will only re-motivate politics' ambitions for life that Aristotle's ethics tried to limit. The combination of ancient methods with new procedures (medicine or genetics, for instance) only confirms the theoretical stability of the political system, satisfied with "modernizing" its own reign. Agamben declares that "modernity does nothing other than declare its own faithfulness to the essential structure of the metaphysical tradition" [8/11]. The phrase designates an invariance, true; yet it does so, alas, in the name of *logos* and the lost origin, which doesn't need to be reiterated. At the price of a certain impoverishment, Agamben's statement nonetheless depicts better than *Bios* the possible solidarity between Aristotle and today. The obsession with the totalitarian (history or category) in contemporary theories also appears as a protective measure to obscure the variable persistence of biopolitical action in politics.<sup>26</sup>

---

25. Aristotle, *Politica* A.2.1253a.

26. Here is a remark that deserves more than a note, but which the economy of this article prevents me from developing. By another route, Jacques Rancière comes upon a similar idea when he identifies biopolitics as one modality of what he names the police. But by extolling the counter-model of political subjectivation, in any case always riveted on the police, isn't he opening himself to a rehabilitation or distribution of a good politics (the only one worthy of the name) and bad (police order)? Above all, why would we want to maintain a spatial extension of politics that ends up enveloping the entirety of life—minus the role of the police? Is there no other to the political other? On the distribution between police and politics, see Rancière, *Disagreement* 28 ff. [*La Mésentente: Politique et philosophie* 51 ff.]. On biopolitics as a form of police, read the interview granted by Rancière in the journal *Multitudes*, "*Biopolitique ou politique?*"

The current variation is also a means of exploring a (hi)story. In that case, the contribution of the Italian corpus to “biopolitics”<sup>27</sup> holds above all to the retrospective revelation it favors. Our *exaggerated* rereading shows that Aristotle had expressed a coextension of politics and life—and suggested something beyond the *polis*.<sup>28</sup> In other terms, the modern era has not “given birth” to the political tendency to absorb life. But many contemporary thinkers forget what even Aristotle had not omitted: the totalizing ambition of politics should be contradicted by an affirmation of life itself, *notwithstanding* the political order that attempts to contain it. Michel Foucault stated that “man, over millennia, remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal and with the *additional* capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.”<sup>29</sup> Now Foucault and his critics allow us to understand in Aristotle a postulate very different from the one usually attributed to him. For in reading *Politics* with *Nicomachean Ethics* we find the idea of a *naturally* political man. Exaggerating only a little: he is *biologically* a citizen. Life is *political* for those who act within the City, who conform to the triad of existences. But, according to Aristotle, *life is fundamentally political* in any case. Hence Foucault’s “addition” is thoroughly inexact: *Nicomachean Ethics* certifies that the life of man is intrinsically adherent to the *polis*. The “question” of life is posed precisely “in politics,” as presented by Aristotle.

Aristotle the anachronist, as we are reconstructing him, should guard us from the mystical return to the origin; for if there are *bios* and *zōē* in these regions, the contemporary bent toward oppression may take equal recourse in them. Might one yet find the adequate tools to invent a new resistance? I would rather make another, final suggestion. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is barely articulated but irreducibly there: this life in excess of the political force that handles it. Against political totality, there might be the impossible possibility of another life despite all. Not the affirmative biopolitics sought by Esposito, nor the Aristotelian dissymmetry of ways of life subordinated in every manner to the orders of the City. I am speaking instead of the utopian affirmation of a life taking leave of politics. Here the familiar notion of retreat will not suffice, for the word implies a return or spiraling back onto oneself. It would be vain to join “those who turn their backs to politics” [Rancière, *Disagreement* 32/55]: we must depart and look things squarely in the eye. No longer sufficient is the horizontal quota (private here, public there; here I am a citizen, there an autonomous individual). It will always be a matter of leaving politics: recognizing its necessity, its grandeur, its risks—and abandoning it. This movement cannot be completed once and for all but forever begun again. I recognize the political hold, I do not deny it; and I desert it, in the vital contradiction that signifies something. One can hope to combat political tyranny by walking its terrain (the resistance of the exile in Hardt and Negri, Esposito’s renovated biopower, the *true* politics in Rancière); but some *supplementary* refusal is needed. Stating that all livable life is political, or that we should only fight politically against the contemporary bio-order, would be the ultimate victory for the totalizing ambition of *polis* and *police*. I do not call anyone to inaction. On the contrary, let us redouble the political acts of our unassailable lives; *se moquer de la politique c’est aussi faire de la politique*. Let us begin by *affirming* life outside of politics—even today. Politics is not of a concept, of an obscured essence. It is rather a collective, frail, ruined construct of events, words, deeds, thoughts, feelings, forces, powers,

---

27. The quotation marks are meant to refer to a title or to index a problem.

28. That is why the *politikon* attribute is highly specific, if one compares it with other possible “human” features. There is for instance no excess of logos in Aristotle, even suggested in a negative way.

29. History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction 143 [Histoire de la sexualité, vol. I: La volonté de savoir 188; “un animal vivant et de plus capable d’une existence politique,” *my emphasis*].

knowledges; always old—always new. We sometimes fight for better policies, but politics is not all. Just as our words collide and tell us something, just as significance passes lexical meanings, we ought to speak of the fissures of the political. Far from the totalizing tendency of any bio-politics, we should remember that our life is able to be more. Critical scholarship is a possible way of articulating these ideas. But only one way, among others, such as passionate friendship or poetry. In order not to die as a consequence of my measured, chiseled, programmed, that is, totally political life, *I should also strive beyond that field reserved for me*. Seek not only political subjectivation against the police, nor the affirmation of a biopower against the death that determines existence. *Say and show* that there is life in life. Live politics *and* leave politics.

*Translated by Clarissa C. Eagle with the author*

#### WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Trans. of *Homo Sacer*, Vol. 1: *Il Potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. Turin: Einaudi, 1995.
- Ammonius Alexandrinus. *De adfinium vocabulorum differentia*. Ed. Klaus Nickau. Leipzig: Teubner, 1966.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Trans. of *Différence et répétition*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. New York: Verso, 1997. Trans. of *Politiques de l'amitié*. Paris: Galilée, 1994.
- Dubreuil, Laurent. "De la vie dans la vie: Sur une étrange opposition entre *zōē* et *bios*." *Labyrinthe: Atelier interdisciplinaire* 22 (2005): 47–52.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Bios: Biopolitica e filosofia*. Turin: Einaudi, 2005.
- . *Categorie dell'impolitico*. Milan: Il Mulino, 1999.
- . *Communitas: Origine e destino della comunità*. Torino: Einaudi, 1998.
- . *Immunitas: Protezione e negazione della vita*. Torino: Einaudi, 2002.
- Estienne, Henri. *Thesaurus Graecae linguae*. Paris: A. F. Didot, 1831–65.
- Foucault, Michel. *Dits et écrits*. Vol. 4. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.
- . *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1978. Trans. of *Histoire de la sexualité, vol. I: La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.
- . *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Random House, 1973. Trans. of *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. "Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte." *Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland. Entwicklungen und Perspektiven im internationalen Zusammenhang*. Vol. 1: *Die Sozialgeschichte innerhalb der Geschichtswissenschaft*. Ed. Wolfgang Schieder and Volker Sellin. Göttingen: Kleine Vandenhoeck-Reihe, 1986. 89–109.
- Heidegger, Martin. *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde. New York: Twayne, 1958. Trans. of *Was ist das—die Philosophie?* Pfullingen: Neske, 1956.
- Philo, Herennius. *De diversis verborum significationibus*. Naples: D'Auria, 1988.
- Rancière, Jacques. "Biopolitique ou politique?" *Multitudes*. <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Biopolitique-ou-politique.html>.
- . *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999. Trans. of *La Méésentente: Politique et philosophie*. Paris: Galilée, 1995.
- Scholia: Hippocratem and Galenum*. Vol. 2. Königsberg: Bornthweger, 1834.