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(Bio)political Terms in Roberto Esposito's Philosophy

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Political Dialogues

There are not many issues raising as remarkable contentions as biopolitics does. Although the topic is fresh, there was, and still is, plenty of disputants debating upon it. Starting from Rudolf Kjellen "biopolitical" thought evolved through divergent stages and categories of political theory's scope. At the outset it was just another kind of volkism, a theory presenting a society as a human-like organism preserving its existence through focusing on satisfying its needs. Nation was not a set of people there. It was an entity although still dependent from the proper work of its parts. A prefix "bio-" was then referring to the resemblance of proposed theory to the human body. The meaning of biopolitics we know nowadays derives from the thought of other philosopher, Michel Foucault. "For him biopolitics is another name for a technology of power, a biopower which needs to be distinguished from the mechanisms of discipline that emerge at the end of the eighteenth century." (Translator's Introduction, p. XX) Life subjected to biopower is rather regulated than disciplined or governed by public institutions. "Biopolitics" in Foucault, through differentiating power from sovereignity, is rather massifying than individualizing. It is pushed toward the remit of anatomopolitics, a set of many various traits characterizing the population. Foucault's successor is Roberto Esposito, an Italian postmodern philosopher widely-known for bridging deconstruction[1] with biopolitics. Probably he is the one who has gone furthest in questioning the traditional categories of political thought in light of the emergence of biopolitics. Esposito's work is concentrated as well on works of Foucault and Agamben as on the scrutiny of historical documents and evidences. To be able to discover the true meaning of political terms included in these documents, the philosopher traces their semantic origins and sources. A milieu for which Esposito devoted the major part of his work is a slightly broadened period of Second World War. According to him, in these times Nazi philosophy insidiously seeped into political terms causing their reverse and confusion on the one hand or complete change of meaning on the other. To aid the political philosophy Esposito tries to dismantle and reassemble the corrupted notions. The task undertaken in his trilogy comprising *Immunitas*, *Communitas* and *Bìos* has not been however comple-

1 The philosophical term introduced by Jacques Derrida.

ted. In order to do so his latest book on biopolitics *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics* was released.

Roberto Esposito is one of the most prominent from contemporary living political philosophers. He is a professor at the Italian Institute for the Human Sciences in Naples where he lectures contemporary philosophy along with other subjects including political theory and history. He was a member of the sorority which founded the International Centre for a European Legal and Political Lexicon and the European Political Lexicon Research Centre. Esposito is an author of nearly 20 books with the most important *Terza persona. Politica della vita e filosofia dell'impersonale*; *Termini della Politica. Communità, immunità, biopolitica*; *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana*; a famous trilogy *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità*; *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*; *Bìos. Biopolitica e filosofia*; and few other minor works including *Ordine e conflitto. Machiavelli e la letteratura politica del Rinascimento italiano*; *Categorie dell'impolitico*; *Nove pensieri sulla politica*; *L'origine della politica. Hannah Arendt o Simone Weil?* Such tremendous and prodigious contribution to political science places Esposito as the cutting-edge amongst contemporary acclaimed philosophers. Some of his most remarkable works were translated into English: *Communitas: the Origin and Destiny of Community*; *Immunitas. The Protection and Negation of Life*; *Bìos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*; *Third Person. Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*; *Living Thought. The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*; and last but not least *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics* reviewed here.

Terms of the Political is a culmination book of previously published Esposito's trilogy. In eleven chapters the philosopher struggles with problems ensued from his recent writings, heretofore unresolved. Interestingly, every chapter can successfully be a stand-alone article. That is in fact. The book reminds rather an appendix, a set of separate and divergent essays than a consistent dissertation focused on the particular issue. Nevertheless, gathered together they constitute an intelligible and pertinent whole. What is their connecting element? The most probably it is some kind of uncertainty traversing every chapter. Albeit Esposito strived for final resolution to each problem enlisted in the book, the task overwhelmed him. At the end of one of the chapters he wrote "And once again, community presents us with its enigma: impossible and necessary. Necessary and impossible. We are still far from having fully thought it through." (p. 26)

What are the title terms Esposito tries to unravel? The essays contain the author's thoughts on "The Law of Community" (Chapter 1), Immunity in relations to democracy (Chapter 3), freedom (Chapter 4) and violence (Chapter 5). The same goes for community in Chapters 2 and 11. In the remainder ones Esposito examined possible connections between political sciences and philosophy (Chapters 6, 8 and 9), inevitably giving a glimpse to the theoretical heritage of Nazis (Chapter 7). The most intellectually struggling however is Chapter 9 in which the author enjoins a reader to make a choice. The alternative says: "either Totalitarianism or Biopolitics". The exclusive "either" reflects one of the possible strategies of understanding the book. For Esposito the opposition relates to the notion of community and is rather a way to open communication between the chords than the rough contradiction.

That is because the author's understanding of totalitarianism is completely different from its common perception. "Totalitarianism is a profoundly "spiritualist" social formation, entirely opposed to the community of life, and thus also to biopolitics." (p. 8) He also claims that "unlike the totalitarian paradigm, biopolitics is based neither upon a philosophical presupposition nor upon a philosophy of history but upon concrete events. Moreover, it is based not solely on facts but on the effective languages that render these facts intelligible." (p. 105) What are those languages? The answer was not given although an acumen reader can presume that it lies somewhere between Nietzsche's genealogy and Foucault's theory of power/knowledge.

As in his previous books Esposito problematizes the entwinement of life, death and political body through the generalized medicalization of political life and infection that digests and thwarts political philosophy. According to the author one of such viruses is the category of person. In Chapter 10 "Toward the Philosophy of the Impersonal" Esposito wrote: "(...) we would see that the category of the person cannot heal or fill the gap between rights and man, which would make something like human rights possible, because it's precisely the category of person that produces and widens the gap between rights and man to begin with." (p. 114) Although the chapter heralded to be interesting, the author did not make a further development of the idea appearing at the outset. In the essay Esposito indebted to Simone Weil, Maurice Blanchot and Gilles Deleuze and focused on the philosophical deconstruction of the term of person, leading a reader to the unknown and uncertain, leaving him with no answer given. Thus the intellectual content of the book suffered significantly which will be noticeable especially for readers familiar with writings of Derek Parfit, Peter Singer or Cécile Fabre. The more inquiring ones shall be however satisfied by Esposito-'s previous book *Third Person. Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*.

Is it worth to read *Terms of the Political* if in fact the book exposes a reader to a potential disappointment? Its aim was to propose some solutions and to cure contemporary political philosophy, to answer questions heretofore unanswered, while we received a book putting even more question marks instead. But isn't that the thing that we would have expected from philosophical essays? Isn't a contemporary philosophy sick of too many answers and certainties? Esposito's way to aid the political philosophy is to enjoin a reader for seeking his own answers. The author does not therefore ask "what is a relation between immunity and community?", he rather encourages a recipient for asking "what is my place in thereto?". Can the question about biopolitics help us identify what a community, from a philosophical perspective, truly is? It is still hard to answer although reading Esposito's essays will be certainly helpful in the closer examination of this and similar problems. Therefore the query from the outset of this paragraph shall be replied positively along with stipulating that the reading won't be disappointing. Although Esposito failed in the main task, the lecture still is one of the must-reads within the purview of contemporary political philosophy.