

Paul Against Biopolitics

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Abstract

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Amidst the “biopolitical paradoxes” (as analyzed by, inter alia, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, and Giorgio Agamben) of a world seemingly governed by liberal nation-states with their monopoly on power and the ability to unleash violence, the author argues that only Saint Paul takes us outside the order of the biopolitical. While classical antique notions of natural law, to which Paul appealed, do so to some degree, only Paul thinks outside the horizon of *both* antique *and* modern biopolitics. The key difference is that Paul thought natural justice not just in relation to life, but in relation to resurrection. Bruno Blumenfeld’s treatment of Paul is examined closely for its ecclesiological and eschatological insights. Milbank concludes that the counter-factual of resurrection alone permits us hopefully to imagine a politics that does not inevitably support regimes of abjection. Only the arrival of such a reality in time, however, provides for a restored ontology of undying life, and thereby renders possible the project of human social justice.



1. *The Modern Biopolitical*

Today we live in a neo-Weberian moment. Capitalism, since it requires for its very operation (and not as mere ideological concealment), a belief in abstract fetishes and the worship of the spectacle of idealised commodities, is a quasi-religion.¹ But in the early twenty-first century it appears to need to buttress itself with the approval and connivance of actual religion.

Why should this be the case? Why do we now have the sacred in a double register? Perhaps the answer has to do with the extremity of neoliberalism (mutated into neoconservatism) as such. As Walter Benjamin and later Michel Foucault argued, liberalism concerns the biopolitical.² For liberalism promotes an imagined self-governing of life through a certain capture and disciplining of natural forces of aggression and desire within the framework of a cultural game, governed by civil conventions and instituted laws. In this conception, life is as much of a cultural construct as is law, although the naturalness of life thought of as innately self-regulating is always insinuated. But the life which biopolitics both unleashes and governs is also conceived as intrinsically wild and untameable and dynamically creative, since it is to do with the expression of egoistic passions. Both in politics proper and in economics, liberalism rejoices in an order that is supposed to emerge na-

¹ See Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion" in *Selected Writings*, eds., Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1: 288–91; Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religions: the Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2002).

² Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" in *Selected Writings* 1:236–52, especially 237. Benjamin here points out how Darwin reinforces Hobbes: prior to the political living things are seen as having a "natural right" to deploy violence and life and violence are seen as practically co-terminous. It is, however, Foucault who defined precisely the biopolitical paradigm in the sense that I am discussing it here. See Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la Biopolitique* (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2004). It is finally Giorgio Agamben who makes the crucial connection between biopolitics and the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt (ultimately it is a Hobbesian legacy that binds all this together). See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 126–36.

turally from the clash of passions themselves. This may, as in contract theory, imply a point of rupture in which the clash is diverted from anarchic war to a regulated agonistic game, or else, as in the more sophisticated perspectives deriving from the Scottish enlightenment, it may imply a pre-contractual tendency of passion to balance passion, resulting in an unplanned and regulated order, political as well as political-economic.

But in either case it is deemed that, by nature, a spontaneously competing and to a degree co-operating (through natural mutual sympathy) human multitude erects an artificial framework that will channel this spontaneity for further mutual benefit. Life itself is seen as generating contract and law. Contract and law are seen as disciplining life, but only in order to further it.³

In this way anarchy lurks not just in life outrunning contract, but also in contract outrunning life. Moreover, these twin excesses collude in such a way that the formal pursuit of nominal goals and real living violence collapse into one.

These biopolitical paradoxes manifest themselves in the political sphere as well as in the economic one. In modern times, laws typically proceed from a sovereign power granted legitimacy through general popular consent as mediated by representation. Insofar as such a procedure is taken to be normative, it can be seen as embodying a Hobbesian “natural law” for the derivation of legitimate power from the conflicts endemic to human life. But this is quite different from saying that the sovereign power is answerable as regards equity to a law of natural justice, grounded in an eternal divine law – as, for example, in Aquinas. No, the logic of legality is, in the post-Hobbesian case, entirely immanent and positivistic. Yet, just for this reason, as traced by Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, and today Giorgio Agamben, paradoxes of the biopolitical result.⁴ Just as life and contract are supposed to harmonize but

³ See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 26–34, 98–112. And see also his *Limits to Capital* (Oxford: OUP 1982) and Giovanni Arrighi, “Hegemony Unravelling-I,” *New Left Review* 32 (2005): 23–80.

⁴ Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”; Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1985); Giorgio Agamben,