

Empowerment and Fragility

Empowerment and Fragility:

*Biopolitics and Ethics in
International Relations
and Strategic Studies*

By

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Raphael Lemkin,
who above everyone else knew what human empowerment and human
fragility really mean

This book is also dedicated to the School of Social and Political Sciences,
and all my professors and colleagues

To O.F., M.F., J.C.P., B.M. and M.L.

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

BIOPOLITICS, ETHICS, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND STRATEGIC STUDIES: A COMPLEX DIALOGUE IN A COMPLEX GLOBAL ERA

This book discusses how the two interrelated questions of biopolitics and ethics influence discursive and non-discursive practices in the fields of international relations and strategic studies.

I believe there is a literature gap in what concerns the articulation between the subjects of biopolitics and ethics in the field of international relations, as well as in the arena of strategic studies (Amstutz 2013; Rosenthal and Kapstein 2009). The subjects are, in the existing literature in the abovementioned areas, only discussed as separate questions, and the interdependence between them, at the discursive and public policy levels, is seldom explored. This book tries to discuss the following research question: in what ways do the discussions on global regimes that rule human empowerment and human fragility in the international and strategic arenas require the establishment of a complex relation between the contested concepts of biopolitics and ethics?

At a theoretical level, the book draws mainly from critical and poststructuralist authors and approaches. One of the main theoretical references of the book is Foucauldian literature; namely, what concerns Foucault's work on "governmentality" and the intersections between truth regimes and modern forms of biopower (Foucault 2007; 1999; Rose 1996). A second major theoretical source concerns the writings of Giorgio Agamben, particularly his thoughts on contemporary biopolitics and the "state of exception" (1998). Epistemologically, post-positivist methods, namely discourse analysis, will be fundamental research methods (Huysmans et al. 2015; Munster and Aradau 2017).

At the empirical level, the book focus on six main areas: (i) the politics of (in)security, (ii) complex emergencies and contemporary terrorism, (iii) health, risk and population management, (iv) environment and climate change, (v) the politics of memory and trauma, and (vi) migration and

refugee flows. The research potential of the book derives from three interrelated pillars: the originality and interdependence of its theoretical and empirical agendas, the usefulness of discussing a set of relevant international and strategic questions establishing a critical articulation between ethics and biopolitics, and the adequacy of debating how, particularly in the last decade, international public policies in sensitive areas like terrorism, global health, global migration flows, and humanitarian assistance are being built through global policy regimes and global discursive regimes.

The originality and interdependence of the book's theoretical and empirical agendas concern the already mentioned joint discussion of the concepts of biopolitics and ethics in the international and strategic arenas. Such originality also regards the use of a poststructuralist frame to deconstruct classic rationalist strategic thinking. This is particularly important since strategic studies' literature seems to assume that strategic thinking should occur only through rationalist and realist ontological frameworks (Freedman 2013). Consequently, there is an increasing distinction between strategic studies, security studies, and geopolitics. Thinking about strategic issues through a poststructuralist language can contribute to establishing a connection between strategic studies, Critical security studies, and critical geopolitics, and therefore broaden the theoretical complexity of strategic and internationalist studies. The usefulness of discussing a set of relevant international and strategic questions establishing a critical articulation between ethics and biopolitics derives from the observation that those two concepts are at the core of what Foucault (2001) designates as the "care of the self," understood as the permanent need felt by citizens (scholars included) to establish surveillance mechanisms concerning how governments administrate human empowerment and fragility. Finally, the appropriateness, regarding current internationalist and strategic literature and debates, of discussing how international public policies in sensitive areas like transnational terrorism, global health, global migration flows or humanitarian assistance are being constructed through international regimes, derives from the centrality given by decision makers and epistemic communities to discursive practices whose performative role is to legitimize those regimes before transnational publics. The legitimation of those discursive practices encompasses challenges which reveal the importance of establishing a critical bridge between biopolitics and ethics in order to understand major contemporary questions in the international and strategic realms.

The Conceptual Question: Biopolitics and its Conceptual Conundrums

Biopolitics is as a contested concept mainly discussed within several strands of philosophical and political scientific thought (Liesen and Walsh 2011). In the first decades of the twentieth century, the concept of biopolitics, introduced by Rudolph Kjellen in the 1920s and later discussed by Morley Robert, was employed in order to establish an “organicist” view of the state, understood as a “lifeform,” and establish a bridge between biology and state workings and developments (Liesen and Wash 2011, 1). In the US context, the concept was introduced in the 1970s by a group of scholars with the purpose of establishing a “sub-discipline” that could study political behaviour, public policies, and institutions from the ontological and methodological perspectives of “life science” (Liesen and Walsh 2011, 1). Those scholars were influenced by the works of James C. Davies and Lyndon Caldwell who, inspired by behaviourism, started to study the influence of the biological aspects of human behaviour on political decisions and public policies (Liesen and Walsh 2011). However, by 2004, many US scholars deeply influenced by European continental and particularly poststructuralist philosophy were already adopting the Foucauldian approach to biopolitics that discusses how modern governments rule populations through the control of their biopolitical data (Liesen and Walsh 2011, 1).

Recently, the concept has become a “buzzword” (Lemke and Casper 2011, 1), which means that it is used transversally in several “discourses” and scientific areas, but also in the public domain. Roberto Esposito (2008, 13) refers to biopolitics as a key concept through which we can (re)interpret traditional political concepts like democracy, law, and sovereignty. The concept has become a critical notion for discussions within diverse public policies which contributes to a considerable degree of contestation regarding its “empirical” and “normative” dimensions (Lemke and Casper 2011, 1; Liesen and Walsh 2011). The term “biopolitics” directs us to political science and how certain public policies regard “life” as an object of public deliberation (Lemke and Casper 2011, 1).

If we define public policy as “what public officials within government, and by extension the citizens they represent, choose to do or not to do about public problems” (Kraft and Furlong 2018, 5), we can understand that it is difficult to separate public policymaking from the management of “life” as a policy issue, even if we assume the constructed nature of what constitutes a “public problem” and also the contingent character of how social “phenomena become real” and are interpreted and politicized as public

issues (Gusfield 1981, 2). However, in some of the literature, “life” excludes politics since it is considered that “politics is situated beyond biological life,” which transforms the concept of biopolitics into a paradox (Lemke and Casper 2011, 2). Such a perspective is fundamentally normative since it is considered that politics should be located beyond human biology, as such a detachment between public decision making and “bodily” questions is a requirement for human “freedom” and “interaction” (Lemke and Casper 2011, 2).

The belief that politics should be located “beyond biological life” has become an anachronism due to the pervasiveness of theories that, based on authors like Michel Foucault or Giorgio Agamben, discuss biopolitics in numerous academic fields (Mills 2018, 1). The concept was adopted by several disciplines as a “theoretical point of reference,” and is at the core of the emergence of several associated terms and areas of expertise, namely “biocultures,” “biocapital,” and “biosociality” (Mills 2018, 1). It has allowed scholars to study how scientific developments like “biotechnology” have consequences in terms of “human reproduction,” and discuss the intersections among politics, life, and “life sciences” (Liesen and Walsh 2011, 4).

The contested nature of the concept explains its level of scientific “fecundity” (Mills 2018, 1). The same conceptual contestation also derives from the fact that the concept seems to be a powerful explaining factor for a varied number of phenomena that complexify contemporary societies, from the dilemmas of modern medicine to the way questions like poverty or migrations flows are politically represented and managed (Mills 2018, 1).

In fact, as Robert Esposito (2008, 7) argues, contemporary societies are confronted with ambiguous “phenomenon” whose comprehension requires the articulation between “life and politics” as well as the adoption of a “new conceptual language” centred on the concept of biopolitics. Biopolitics is, therefore one of the concepts that allows us to interpret the more significant contemporary politically events (Esposito 2008, 7). The scientific relevance of biopolitics is that it embodies the “double tendency” that Esposito (2008, 7) identifies in current international questions – the rising “superimposition” among the realms of power/law and life, and the consequent intimate articulation between the exercise of power and the exercise of death. Esposito does not consider the hierarchical relation between politics and biological life as a crucial question. Instead, he prefers to think about the philosophical articulation between the exercise of politics and biological life, understanding it as an identical lifeform. The author argues that such a discussion would lead to the consideration of biopolitics as inherent to life

and not as something which is optional and merely elective in terms of the contemporary dynamics with which human beings are confronted every day (2008, 12). To argue that biopolitics is intrinsic to life is not to say that life should be regarded as a “function” of politics, but to debate ways through which to disempower sovereignty regarding life dynamics and discuss why some lives seem worthier and more “regrettable” than others, as well as how to overcome biopolitics as a potential form of exclusion (Esposito 2008; Butler 2004).

Following Mills (2018, 1), the current degree of scientific and lay discussions around the concept also emerges from two interrelated but distinct factors. Firstly, the term is employed as a central concept in both scientific and non-scientific discussions, namely at the level of “political activism.” What is crucial is that within these discussions the concept of biopolitics is not treated as a crystallized and reified concept, but on the contrary is considered with “theoretical” and “interpretative” openness and elasticity. Secondly, such “theoretical” and “interpretative” openness stimulates the intellectual debate around the concept and prevents attempts, from several theoretical schools, to set the concept by defining its conceptual core as a metanarrative and allowing for the emergence of richer theoretic and empirical discussions. However, it is known that when a concept is endowed with “theoretical flexibility” it loses conceptual definition and precision. Consequently, Mills (2018) divides the approaches to the concept of biopolitics into two main and interdependent perspectives: an empirical-descriptive approach and a critical-normative approach.

An empirical-descriptive approach underpins a genealogical perspective of the concept, understanding it as an “historical phenomenon” with verifiable empirical manifestations, particularly at the level of how power is exercised among societies. Foucauldian approaches to modern rationalities of rule and the articulation between biopolitics, biopower, and governmentality illustrate such an approach (Mills 2018; Foucault 2007; Dean 2010; Rose 1996). An identical genealogical approach is at the core of Giorgio Agamben’s treatment of the concept of biopolitics (1998; for a discussion see Mills 2018). If we compare Foucauldian literature with Agamben’s work on biopolitics, we can observe that while Foucault represents biopolitics as fundamentally a product of modernity, in particular of modern forms of constructing governmental rule, Agamben discusses how biopolitics was already present in pre-modern societies, namely in the classical ancient world (Agamben 1998; Mills 2018; Esposito 2008).

The critical normative approach questions the consequences of policies and institutions that embody the “biopolitical ontology” for Western contemporary societies (Mills 2018, 1). Foucault (2007) discusses the

articulation between biopower and governmentality as both a “technology of population” whose goal is to foster life and as an intensification of state power over the human body allowing governments to hold “power over life and death.” Giorgio Agamben (1998) develops his concept of *Homo Sacer* and represents it as an artefact of modern biopower upholding a negative perspective of biopolitics, and understanding it as a form of stripping human beings of their rights, namely the right to life itself. The human is positioned at the “intersection between the totalizing and the individualizing processes” that construct him “as a product of contemporary biopolitics” (Ferreira and Marcelino 2011, 137; Agamben 2002, 41). Following Agamben, the abolition of *Homo Sacer* should constitute the core of political communities (Agamben 1998). Nevertheless, predominantly in “states of exception,” often invoked in liberal democracies within contexts of securitarian manoeuvres, when the rule of law is deferred and the governmental apparatus is empowered, the relation among biopower and illiberal policies that facilitate the materialization of “bare life” becomes a characteristic mark of the modern development of sovereignty (Agamben 2005).

A distinct perspective concerning the different approaches to the concept of biopolitics is suggested by Liesen and Walsh (2011, 11), who argue that there are two main and disparate ways to interpret and study the concept of biopolitics: the “scientific biopolitics” approach and the “Foucauldian biopolitics” perspective. The differences among the two approaches are profound since they adopt opposing ontologies and epistemologies in order to discuss biopolitics (Liesen and Walsh 2011, 12). The “scientific biopolitics” perspective adopts a rationalist ontology associated with a purely positivist epistemology, while the Foucauldian approach, and the overall poststructuralist approaches, follow a non-rationalist ontology combined with a post-positivist and interpretative epistemology (Liesen and Walsh 2011, 12). The “scientific biopolitics” standpoint researches empirical data originating from life sciences to apply such data to the rationalist study of politics, which leads to the consideration of biopolitics as a “sub-discipline” within political science (Liesen and Walsh 2011, 12). Foucauldian perspectives, on the other hand, discuss biopolitics as a “technology of power” refusing rationalism, positivism, scientism, and, above all, disciplinary confinement (Foucault 2007). The comparison between the two approaches, and mainly from the 1990s onwards, reveals that Foucauldian theories became the dominant perspective leading to the questioning of the term “scientific biopolitics,” specifically in what regards its disciplinary relevance (Liesen and Walsh 2011, 24).

However, the “scientific biopolitics” approach has inspired interesting conceptual developments, namely what Agni Arvanitis, departing from the concept of *bios*, designates as “bio-diplomacy,” defined as the need to foster international cooperation concerning environmental questions and stimulating the search for joint policies in the environmental sector (1993, 10). Arvanitis (1993, 1) believes that “global harmony” would emerge from a new attitude of the international society concerning what she designates as “bio-centred values.” Concepts like “bio-diplomacy,” “bio-education,” “bio-legislation,” “bio-culture,” and “bio-centred values,” developed by the author (1993, 10), highlight the idea that humankind should direct its efforts towards the protection of “bios,” conceptualized as “life itself.” In what regards international politics, and since “the common roots of all forms of life constitute the body of bios,” Arvanitis (1993, 10) considers that “bios” could be a uniting force that bonds human beings despite their diversity, particularly if associated with the power of knowledge and education.

Departing from an opposing standpoint, Foucault approaches biopolitics as an evolving political process that allows the “guiding” of human beings and the “direction” and “constraining” of their agency and behaviour, directly articulated with the exercise of sovereignty (2008, 1–2). As Agamben states, it was in the first volume of the work *History of Sexuality* that Foucault introduced the belief that at the beginning of modernity, governmental power began to comprise biological life in its power dynamics, leading to the emergence of biopolitics (Agamben 1998, 3; Foucault 1976). Modernity is therefore the moment whereby the human is no longer a biological individual capable of “political existence” but a modern subject whose status as a living being is strongly questioned by political strategies and the exercise of governmental sovereignty (Agamben 1998, 3; Foucault 1976). Foucault argues that, at a certain point in modern political history, territorial control stopped being the focus of governmental rule now centred on population control (Foucault 2001). Such a shift changed the essence of sovereignty framed by the need to exercise the “government of men” (Agamben 1998, 3; Foucault 2001).

Foucault discusses governmental practices as a way to deconstruct and analyse the “rationalization of governmental policies in the exercise of political sovereignty” (2008, 2). His goal is to question and not take as given the concepts associated with the exercise of sovereignty, explicitly the concepts of “state,” “civil society,” “people,” and “sovereignty” itself (3). Foucault argues that it is only possible to study biopolitics, understood in its relation to the concept of population, by discussing a specific type of governmental rationality – liberal governmentality (22). Liberalism is at the core of biopolitics, and it is the relation between liberalism and biopolitics

that Foucault develops in his lectures at the *Collège de France* (22). This is why Michel Senellart (2008, 327) considers liberalism as the logical framework that contains biopolitics' "conditions of intelligibility." The purpose of Foucault's work is to discuss the rationalities that legitimize the exercise of government over biological life and population (2008, 319). Foucault starts with the premise that modern liberalism changed the object directing sovereign role since population became the focus of a novel way to reason about governmental policies now centred on the "politics of life" (Senellart 2008, 327). In this context, the articulation between biopolitics, modernity, and liberalism became crucial (Foucault 2008).

Modernity, in Foucault's (2008) reading, is sustained by drawing the self thoroughly into the scope of social discipline. The pursuit of self-consciousness is the pursuit of a future in which all impulses that govern the self and all forces that govern the order are fully transparent to the participants (Foucault 2008). In the *Birth of the Clinic* (2003), Foucault shifts his methodology from the study of social practices as attempts to systematize the deepest and most inaccessible dimensions of human experience to the analysis of the structures that guide the practices, discourses, and experiences that constitute the knowing subject and its objects (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). As is pointed by Dreyfus and Rabinow, this shift represents Foucault's rejection of both hermeneutics and structuralism, as well as his embrace of a specific kind of epistemology that searches not for extemporal structures but historical conditions of existence (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). The historical conditions of existence should here be understood as an antithesis to the study of historical conditions of possibility. The hermeneutical perspective on intersubjectivity by identifying social reality with the shared consciousness of participants ends by emptying out the appearance/reality distinction (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). Michel Foucault (2008) and Giorgio Agamben (1998) critically address this ideal of self-consciousness and reflexivity, redefining it as an expression of the modern disciplinary societies. Both authors explore the space for a potential disjuncture among the real structure of public life and the appearance it presents to its participants (Foucault 2007; Agamben 1998; 1993; 2002). From the point of view of the individual, the participation in public life is an empowering strategy that enables a sense of freedom conditional upon the adoption of social roles (Foucault 2007; Agamben 1998; 1993; 2002). This empowering strategy is achieved through multilayered institutional affiliation and the promotion of self-conscious collective goods, and is at the core of the deployment of modern disciplinary apparatus (Foucault 2007; Agamben 1998).

Foucault draws from Nietzsche's analysis of the tensions enshrined in

the formation of the self (2011). That leads him (2011) to deny Cartesian or existentialist conceptions of the subject, for they endow the self with a substance. Such an essentialist view works as a theoretical blinder regarding the historical variation of the articulation between the subjects and the truth games where they are immersed. This proximity with Nietzsche also inspires Foucault to study the genealogy of power relations, for instance through governmentality (2007). That is why Foucault frequently stresses how resistance is dependent on the aesthetics of existence (2001; 2011).

Giorgio Agamben develops Foucault's work, strongly inspired not only by the latter's conceptualization of biopolitics, but also by Hannah Arendt's work concerning how modernity brought "biological life" into the core of sovereign politics (1998, 3). Agamben's negative standpoint on biopolitics partially follows Arendt's perspective in *The Human Condition* (1998) that the prioritization of biological life in relation to political life led to the degradation of modern political regimes (1998, 4). One of the main arguments developed by Agamben throughout his work is that the "politicization of bare life" should be considered as the foundational moment of modernity, since it conducts to a fundamental transformation of "classic political thought" (2017, 7). Arendt's work opened a window that inspired Agamben to critically address the materialization of biopolitics in historical contexts, such as totalitarian states or concentration camps (Agamben 1998). Also, Agamben's negative perspective on biopolitics leads him to argue that the twentieth century historical "enigmas" will necessarily have to be explained, bearing in mind what the author designates as a "biopolitical horizon" whose institutionalization led to the dissolution of the foundational concepts that were at the centre of political science as a scientific discipline (1998, 4). Consequently, in order to recuperate politics, it is necessary to question and deconstruct the relation between "bare life" and politics as well as how such a relation is at the core of seemingly opposing contemporary ideologies (4). Agamben argues that a discussion concerning contemporary biopolitics must contemplate the articulation between what the author designates as "juridical-institutional models of power" and "biopolitical models of power," or, in other words, the point of connection between "objective power" and "subjective power" (1998, 6). It is the study of such a moment of connection that prompts Agamben (1998) to claim that at the core of sovereign power resides the integration of "bare life" within the political arena, which consequently inspires the author to state that the foundational act of "sovereign power" is the constitution of a "biopolitical body."

Biopolitics is considered as the process that led to the collapse of "modern politics," materialized in the hegemony of "bare life" and the

disappearance of political and public life (Agamben 2016, xxi). In fact, “bare life” is located at a point of connection between biopower and biopolitics whose relation is not one of opposition but of coordination (Agamben 1998; 2002). The articulation between biopower and biopolitics produces the precarious status of the “bare life,” conceptualized as the life of the *Homo Sacer* whose condition is of permanent and absolute subjection to the menace of death (Agamben 2008). Such absolute subjection of the human being to an “unconditional” death threat, which characterizes the condition of the *Homo Sacer*, is at the core of biopower (Agamben 1998). This establishes a radical distinction between Agamben’s and Foucault’s approach to biopower since the latter considers that the essence of biopower can be found in the “care of all living” and not on *thanatopolitics* (Agamben 2008). In Agamben’s view, biopolitics is responsible not only for the constitution of the condition inherent to the status of the *Homo Sacer*, but also the construction of an artificial perspective on life that transforms the human into biopolitics’ and biopower’s principal subject (Agamben 1998, 98). When “bare life” becomes the main focus of governmental power it brings to light the relation between the former and sovereign power, and allows comprehension of how the exclusion of “bare life” should be one of the pillars of modern politics (Agamben 1998).

Inspired by Aristotle’s distinction between *zoe* and *bios* – “bare life” and political life – Agamben argues that the exclusion of the latter regarding the former is established through a relation of exception whereby *zoe* is removed from *bios*, even though, and in Agamben’s words, “[b]are life remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (1998, 11). The relation that “bare life” establishes with political life resembles the articulation between the rule and its exception, which constitutes the core of the “zone of indistinction” classified by Agamben as the “state of exception” (1998, 28). Through biopower, the sovereign government has the ability to condemn an individual to a condition of “bare life” where such an individual is regarded as a being confined to a “state of exception,” and reduced to a status where they can no longer claim legal defence. It is what Agamben designates as the “sovereign ban” (1998, 84). Such a “sovereign ban” is particularly complex since it excludes individuals from a political community, but they remain subject to the law’s chastisement, which means that that it is an included exclusion – an individual is “abandoned” by the law but remains within the law’s punishing remit (1998). Agamben argues that, since modernity located biological life at the core of governmental (bio)politics, and since the “sovereign ban” is situated at the centre of modern politics, each citizen of a political community can be considered as

embodying the condition of a *Homo Sacer* (1998, 111). Also, Agamben claims that modern states have stretched their powers regarding “bare life” and biopower, which has resulted in the constitution of a space of indistinction between life and death “decisions” (1998, 122). Biopolitics can easily adopt the condition of *thanatopolitics* since life and death decisions assume both a political and a technical nature, and the sovereign establishes relations of “symbiosis” with other figures, namely the “jurist,” the “cleric,” the “doctor,” the “scientist,” and the “expert” (1998, 122).

An author who is deeply influenced by Agamben’s interpretation of biopolitics is Judith Butler (2009). Her work on the concept of “precariousness” is profoundly articulated with the way biopolitics can be considered as an instrument for the exclusion of life. In fact, Butler (25) defines “precariousness” as an asymmetrical and selective condition which is politically induced, and through which populations are subject to a deprivation of economic and social care which consequently makes them more vulnerable to displacement, poverty, injury, violence, and death. In Butler’s work (2009), it is an ontology of the human body that determines how individuals are exposed to differential regimes of care or deprivation, and which consequently forces a discussion concerning how biopolitical practices are at the core of contemporary technologies of exclusion. The autho (2009) argues that how we represent particular populations and individuals as exposed to a condition of vulnerability depends on historical and biopolitical frames that *a priori* define what “life” is and which lives should be considered and grieved as human lives. Butler’s work is an example of the interdependency between the empirical-descriptive and critical-normative approaches to the concept of biopolitics (Mills 2018, 1). Such interdependence derives from the fact that the author defines biopolitical precariousness as comprising two elements: relationality and finitude (Butler 2009). The element of relationality can be understood within the empirical-descriptive approach since it highlights how precariousness derives from individuals’ interaction and relations with a contingent world (Butler 2009). It therefore becomes necessary to discuss ways to reduce human exposure to contingency, namely in what concerns medical care, housing, employment, or even legal status. Finitude regards the way precariousness underpins the extreme volatility of the human condition, since human beings, from birth, are put in a situation of drastic vulnerability in “facilitated modes” of living and dying (Butler 2009, 14). Such drastic vulnerability is, however, profoundly asymmetrical, relational, and “socially constructed,” and therefore calls for a critical-normative approach able to discuss and reveal the politically criteria that allocate, throughout populations and individuals, the condition of “grievability”

(Butler 2009). Judith Butler can be considered as an author who, following Agamben, regards biopolitics from the view of *thanatopolitics* (for a discussion see Mills 2018). However, other authors, mainly those writing in the Foucauldian tradition, are less prone to establishing a necessary connection between biopolitics and *thanatopolitics* (Hardt and Negri 2004).

As mentioned above, Foucault (2007) debates the relation among biopower and the exercise of governmental rule as a “technology of population” whose purpose is to promote life and increase the state’s control over the human body, thus allowing governments to claim “power over life and death.” Agamben (1998), on the other hand, develops his concept of *Homo Sacer*, representing it as a construction of modern biopower and arguing for the negative consequences of biopolitics, represented as a way of stripping individuals and communities of their right to life. In this context, Agamben claims to have solved a dilemma never fully resolved by Foucault – does biopolitics, as a rationality of rule, foster life or, on the contrary, thought about in order to promote death; or, in Esposito’s words, why does “a politics of death always risks being reversed into a work of death?” (2008, 8). The link between biopolitics and *thanatopolitics* assumes a fundamental relevance in the work of Agamben, as the author discusses the effects of biopolitics in the model of political governance developed within modernity (1998; 2005). The genealogical framework, through which Foucault developed the concept of biopolitics, particularly in what concerns the relation between the concept of modernity and the exercise of sovereignty, was never fully illuminated by the author (Esposito 2008). Other thinkers like Esposito (2008) consider that biopolitics and modernity have an indubitable historical connection.

Esposito (2008) allocates particular pertinence to the historical genealogy of biopolitics and its practices, establishing a triangular articulation between the concepts of modernity, biopolitics, and immunization. Esposito (2008, 12; 2011, 1) defines immunization as an “interpretative category” amenable to being used as a key concept to understand different events from different fields, and that can be characterized as a “negative” and a “protective response in face of risk.” Phenomena such as migrations, global health, or terrorism are issues which called for what Esposito designates as the central assumption, introduced by modernity and theoretically articulated with biopolitics, that “self-preservation” is at the core of all political decision-making “from sovereignty to liberty” (2008, 9). The notions of “self-preservation” and “negative protection of life,” which are at the core of the concept of immunization, are triggered when a certain phenomenon disturbs the social balance, demanding its reconstruction (Esposito 2011, 2; 2008, 12).

Esposito (2011, 2) draws from the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas (1994) to argue that the element of risk, which is at the core of the triangulation of biopolitics, modernity, and immunization, is fundamentally related to border transgression and the location of the border considered as a threat that calls for the instinct of “self-preservation.” In this context, a central articulation between immunization and contagion is established since the latter, which is situated at the intersection of distinct areas like biology, communication, law, and politics, materializes the belief that risk is located at the border of either the individual body or political communities, and threatens the integrity of what once was secure (Esposito 2011, 2). Contemporary debates of what should constitute life and death should be understood by taking into consideration the articulation between sovereign institutions and epistemic, legal, and religious entities that can also establish the criteria that constitute the politics of life and death (Esposito 2011). Following Esposito (3), international events, in the health, migration, and technology arenas, that foster the need for immunization practices are becoming more intense and widespread, transforming “biopolitical contagion” into an apparently overpowering dynamic. The widespread contemporary dynamics of “biopolitical contagion” demonstrate the importance of the conceptual articulation between immunization and modernity, as well as the negative character assumed by “self-preservation” within the framework of the concept of immunization (Esposito 2011). In Esposito’s words, “only when biopolitics is linked conceptually to the immunity dynamic of the negative protection of life does biopolitics reveal its specific modern genesis” (2008, 9).

Other authors, also writing within the poststructuralist tradition and who, like Esposito, confer specific relevance to the historical genealogy of biopolitics and its consequences concerning governmental practices, are Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004). Hardt and Negri attempt to go beyond Agamben’s articulation of biopolitics and *thanatopolitics* and develop what has been designated as an “affirmative biopolitics” (Hardt and Negri 2004; Campbell 2008, xxvi). Hardt and Negri (2004, 93) frame their conception of biopolitics within their approach to the ontologies of contemporary resistance to sovereign power, or what they define as the “genealogy of resistances.” In *Multitude: War and Democracy in an Age of Empire* (2004, 94), the authors claim that the leading and “hegemonic” systems of contemporary production are focused on the creation of ideational “goods,” namely “ideas, knowledge, forms of communication and relationships.” The construction of normative “goods” is associated by Hardt and Negri with the constitution of “forms of life,” and consequently with the construction of biopolitics, since the creation of ideational goods

involves “social life” in its integrity (Hardt and Negri 2004, 94). The authors (2004, 94, 315) start from the premise that both biopower and biopolitics are dominant but geopolitically opposing forces within a society. In fact, the way biopower and biopolitics relate to the social realm are completely distinct, since while biopower is associated with the hierarchical exercise of sovereignty, biopolitics regards the constitution of “social relationships” and “immaterial goods” through what the authors define as “collaborative forms of labour” or “biopolitical labour” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 95, 107). Hardt and Negri (2004, 95, 107) argue that biopolitics is at the core of democratic practices and the creation of “social life itself.” Hence, “biopolitical productivity” is directly articulated with the “production and reproduction of new subjectivities” within the social realm and the elaboration of proposals towards the constitution of “alternative societies” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 66–7, 306). The relation between biopolitics and the concept of “genealogy of resistances” derives from the way Negri and Hardt (2004, 349) define biopolitics as “a kind of social flesh that organizes itself as a new social body,” as well as from how the authors relate it to the constitution of “multitudes.” Such a constitution may lead to what Hardt and Negri (2004, 357) designate as “democratic biopolitics,” through which a “new temporality” (*Kairòs*) opens the way for a “new future” and a new understanding of time itself where the “multitude” can defy biopower by causing a break with national sovereignty (Hardt and Negri 2004; Campbell 2008, xxvii).

Hardt and Negri’s perspective of an “affirmative” and benign biopolitics is severely questioned since it does not consider the fact that modernity has produced a great amount of death (Esposito 2008). In Esposito’s perspective (2008), “affirmative biopolitics” reveals a sort of oblivion concerning modern biopolitics’ negative influence on political communities. Esposito’s critique of Hardt and Negri’s “affirmative biopolitics” as well as Agamben’s “negative biopolitics” is based on what the author designates as an “immunitarian aporia,” defined by the observation that modernity produced a paradoxical situation – the “enigma of biopolitics” – whereby “life is protected and strengthened through death” (Esposito 2008). At stake is the relationship that modernity established between sovereignty and biopolitics, critically discussed by Foucault and Agamben, and which remains a conundrum for poststructuralist literature (Campbell 2008, xxvii). While, in Hardt and Negri’s book, biopolitics may surpass sovereign power, Esposito considers sovereignty as “immanent to the workings of the immunity mechanisms,” which the author considers as “driving all forms of modern (bio)politics” (Campbell 2008, xxvii). Esposito establishes an articulation between biopolitics and “immunity,” suggesting that the politics of fear is

the foundation that sustains such articulation since the roots of an “apparatus of immunity” is risk, and therefore fear (Esposito 2008; Campbell 2008, xxvii). Consequently, in Esposito’s perspective, an “affirmative biopolitics” will only be possible when risk, fear, and the need for immunity are no longer at the core of political communities (Esposito 2008; Campbell 2008, xxviii).

Table I.1. Poststructuralist approaches to biopolitics		
Author	Main concept	Main arguments
Michel Foucault	Liberal governmentality	Liberalism as the essential rationality of biopolitics; Biopolitics as a technology of rule and as a technology focused on population control.
Giorgio Agamben	<i>Homo Sacer</i> “Bare Life”	Biopolitics as an instrument for the control of biological life. Negative perspective on biopolitics (<i>thanatopolitics</i>).
Judith Butler	“Precariousness”	Biopolitics as an instrument for the exclusion of life.
Roberto Esposito	“Immunity” / “Self-preservation” / “Immunitarian aporia” / “Apparatus of immunity”	Establishment of a triangulation of biopolitics, modernity, and “immunization.” Risk and the need for immunity at the core of political communities. Existence of a modern biopolitical “enigma” whereby <i>bios</i> is safeguarded and preserved through mechanisms that cause death.
Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri	“Multitude” / “Democratic biopolitics”/ “Biopolitical labour”	Biopolitics as distinct from biopower and as a positive force within the struggle against biopower and sovereignty. Biopolitics as a source of “immaterial goods.”

Sources:

Agamben (2017; 2016; 2005; 2002; 1998); Butler (2009; 2004); Esposito (2011; 2008); Foucault (2011; 2008; 2007; 1976); Hardt and Negri (2004).

The Ontological Question: Ethics and its Imperatives

Ethical rules have a fundamental relational nature since they “guide” individual behaviour towards other individuals. Such guidance endows human conduct with a sense of stability and fulfils social expectations regarding human socialization and cooperation (Bauman 1993, 16). Following Bauman (1993, 17), in the contemporary world, the need for “moral knowledge and skills” has increased at the level of social relations, as well as in what concerns political relations, since the exercise of power and socialization cannot be blind to ethical precepts. However, the sources of “moral rules” are progressively weaker and even invisible to human eyes, for individuals are often unsure about which moral and ethical rules to trust (Bauman 1993, 17). Consequently, the contemporary moral world has been confronted, where ethical rules are concerned, with a “discrepancy” among the “demand and supply” for ethical rules that connects with what literature designates as the “ethical crisis of postmodernity” or the “ethical crisis of modernity,” depending on an author’s perspective on the historical sources and causes of such a “crisis” (Bauman 1993, 17). The contemporary ethical crisis is particularly acute since the growing complexity of our present-day era stresses the need for theories that can give more than “circular” and “fallacious” arguments, and that may construct criteria that allow individuals to identify what is “right and wrong, good or evil, justified, permissible and unjustifiable” (MacKinnon and Fiala 2012, 1).

Such identification is discussed at a global level by international normative theory (Shapcott 2017). In the international arena, ethical discussions are focused not on “explaining the world” but rather with assessing its normative standards and debating “what ought to be done in moral terms” (Shapcott 2017, 205). Within international affairs, moral discussions emerge in very complex global issues such as the rights of migrants and refugees inside host communities, what we “owe” to foreign communities and individuals, whether or not a state should participate in an international conflict, the ethical implications of living in a globalized world, or what, in the present, can be considered as a “just war” (Shapcott 2017, 205).

According to Paul Virillio (2000, 11), the mounting intricacy of contemporary ethics has at its core the fact that, today, history occurs in “real time,” therefore exposing “historical time” to communicating forces.

Virillio argues that there is a relationship between war and how its activities are epitomized and replicated in order to be visually comprehended by individuals (Virillio 2000, 14). Therefore, from Virillio's standpoint, "the tragedy of war is filtered through technology and not through a human being with moral responsibilities" (2000, 14). Virillio claims that data is regarded and normalized as a "religious artefact" which leads to the underpinning of emotions, normalization, and the devaluing of intellectual human activities (Virillio 2000, 14). Hence, the representations of current political violence are "confusing" and "suspicious," whereas war as a true-life "tragedy" remains ethically unreciprocated (Virillio 2000, 14). Drawing from Virillio's work, James Der Derian reinforces the relevance of representation and normalization to the structure of present-day war as a virtual spectacle gifted with a righteous character (Der Derian 2009). As the author argues, "[i]n modern warfare, as the aim of battle shifts from territorial, economic, and material gains to immaterial, perceptual fields, the war of spectacle begins to replace the spectacle of war" (Der Derian 2009, 3). The virtual character of new wars and the relevance of how they are depicted and staged as simulations of truth and not as truth itself reveal how the phenomenology of truth "has moved away into a representation" virtually constructed as a replication (Debord 2000, 3). Truth drops its factual roots now substituted by "hyper-reality" (Baudrillard 1983, 2). From the standpoint of Baudrillard, genuineness and facts acquire the status of a delusion (Baudrillard 1983, 55). Therefore, it is crucial to debate the ethical and moral consequences of what Der Derian entitles as the political creations of "virtual war" and "virtuous war" since:

On the surface, virtuous war cleans up the political discourse as well as the battlefield. Fought in the same manner as they are represented, by real-time surveillance and TV live-feeds, virtuous wars promote a vision of bloodless, humanitarian, hygienic wars. Unlike other forms of warfare, virtuous war has an unsurpassed power to commute death, to keep it out of sight, out of mind. Herein lies its most morally dubious danger. In simulated preparations and virtual executions of war, there is a high risk that one learns how to kill but not to take responsibility for it. One experiences "death" but not the tragic consequences of it. (Der Derian 2009, xvi)

Such ethical debate has to acknowledge how the substitution of truth by unreal creations, emerging as simulations, is responsible for reproducing "locations of meaning which bear a minimal contact with events or particular historical subjects," thus "dislocating the reality of international relations" into sheer settings of imaginary (Der Derian 1990, 301).