

## Book review: Jussi Backman and Antonio Cimino (ed.), Biopolitics and Ancient Thought

Thaning, Morten S.

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Jussi Backman and Antonio Cimino (ed.), *Biopolitics and Ancient Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. 240. ISBN: 978-0-19-284710-2.**

### I.

The term biopolitics appears in Foucault's manuscripts in the 1970s in his attempt to describe techniques of power that traversed and infiltrated modern medical institutions. Foucault claims that the development in the second half of the eighteenth century of what was called *medizinische Polizei*, public hygiene, and social medicine should be re-inserted in the general framework of a 'biopolitics'. Foucault develops the idea of biopolitics as a set of techniques and forms of knowledge aimed at phenomena relating to a mass of living and co-existing beings that constituted a population; such phenomena included the population's health, hygiene, birth and mortality rates, as well as the quality of the gene pool. The broader framework in which Foucault conceives biopolitics is a theme developed since the seventeenth century: the management of state forces. In the context of 19th and 20th century statecraft and political economy, a central purpose of biopolitics is, according to Foucault, to create vital and productive, yet responsible, subjects to increase the power, prosperity and happiness of the state and its population.

In nuce, this is Foucault's approach to biopolitics, although it must be admitted that his reflections on this term have a somewhat sketchy and rather ambiguous character (see Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer and Thaning, 2016: 310-321). Paradoxically, this may to some extent account for the peculiar agenda-setting influence his reflections have exercised: A host of influential thinkers have been able to use Foucault's thoughts on biopolitics as a stepping-stone, while they have also been forced to move beyond these preliminary and probing remarks in so far as they wanted to develop an investigation of biopolitics that could stand on its own.

### II.

The political theorist Mika Ojakangas is one of the latest of these thinkers. His book *On the Greek Origins of Biopolitics* from 2016 is a comprehensive attempt to pursue a path

which Foucault never took. Ojakangas investigates the roots of modern biopolitics in the political thought of Classical Greek Antiquity. As for Aristotle, Ojakangas claims that his political philosophy is decisively biopolitical, and in terms of evidence, he points to passages such as the following from Aristotle's *Politics*, which discusses the preconditions for the best constitution: "As to the necessary things for the state to be considered there first comes the question of population, its quantity and its natural quality" (Pol. 7.1326a5–7). In his contribution to a new anthology edited by Jussi Backman and Antonio Cimino, *Biopolitics and Ancient Thought*, Ojakangas goes so far as to claim that in Plato's works, such as the *Republic*, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, we find a species of what Foucault termed biopolitical state racism. For Foucault, state racism is predicated on the institution of the modern state and on the availability of the objectifying human and social sciences as well as the technological measures afforded by the application of the modern natural sciences. Although this comprehensive institutional and epistemic context is of course completely absent in Classical Antiquity, Ojakangas' interpretation assumes that Plato's dialogues can be read as if they were works of political theory in a modern sense. Resolutely pursuing this approach, Ojakangas distills an ideological core of biopolitics in Plato's works, advocating the improvement of "the welfare of the population in terms of its physical and mental health, morality, and intelligence" (Backman and Cimino 2022, 39). Conversely, he finds a Platonic commitment to state racism in so far as Plato's works advocate the elimination of the physically, mentally and morally deformed through a purge of the city-state. For Plato, this drastic measure is necessary not only to improve the sound human stock and liberate them from the burden of taking care of the deformed but also because the inherent weaknesses are contagious: "[...] without a thorough purge, the rest of the population will degenerate too" (Backman and Cimino 2022, 54). A significant upshot of Ojakangas' interpretation is his distinction between ethnic racism (antibarbarism), also found in Greek Antiquity, and the kind of racism introduced by Plato, based on medico-political principles of psychosomatic health that recommends the killing of members of one's own community if they are physically or morally deficient.

A problem with Ojakangas' account, however, is that it portrays Platonic justice as if it was only the mere result of inherited traits combined with the behavioristic inculcation of norms and capacities through upbringing and educations: "[...] Plato is a determinist: for him the combination of heredity and environment (from the physical environment to the political organization of the city-state) determines the character and the conduct of man. It is not good or bad will but the combination of inborn nature (*physis*), nurture (*trophē*), and education (*paideia*) that renders a man good or corrupts him" (Backman and Cimino 2022, 44 n.7). Within his interpretative framework, there is no room for what Socrates takes to be the core of his philosophical project, according to Plato's *Phaedo* (Phd., 98b-100c). Here Socrates recounts how his philosophical identity was formed when he rejected the reductive approach of the natural philosophers and instead took his refuge to *logoi*,

arguments in reasoned discourse, as the appropriate medium in which to search for the causes, or better, reasons, for actions and judgements. Only by investigating central conceptions in terms of which we justify thoughts and actions, ultimately ideas such as the beautiful, the just or the good, can we make sense of our own agency, according to the Platonic Socrates. Socrates illustrates this with his own decision to stay in prison and accept his sentence rather than taking the opportunity to flee, which was explicitly offered to him by his friends. Solely by taking recourse to *logoi* is it possible to even address the question of whether this was the right decision or not. Ultimately, the Socratic project is a form of care for the self through the practice of giving and asking for reasons, as he emphasizes in the *Apology*, and the ultimate purpose of this care for the self is to preserve and cultivate our self-understanding as persons with agency.

This Socratic project also animates the dialogue about justice in the *Republic*. After all, how can we discern that our soul has a just constitution? As soon as we ask this decisive question, we are thrown back on the Socratic practice of investigating what justice is by giving and asking for reasons. It is within this practice that we can learn whether we are in fact guided by the motivation to care for the whole of the community, the aspiration to attain recognition from others, or simply asserting our immediate interests and desires. If one were to follow Ojakangas' account, it would, in other words, be completely accidental that the giving and asking for reasons is the structuring principle of all of Plato's dialogues. Towards the end of the *Republic*, Socrates suggests that the important thing to take from the entire conversation is not whether Kallipolis – the ideal city-state they have created in words – can be realized but that his interlocutors, Glaukon and Adeimantos, strive to attain and maintain a just constitution in their soul by continuing to examine these matters in mutual dialogue. It is this Socratic perspective which disappears completely from view in Ojakangas' reading of Plato as a biopolitical theorist. Plato's thought is here reduced to a deterministic natural philosophy which is unable to account for choices and deliberation, and which Socrates' identity is therefore predicated on rejecting.

### III.

The other contributions to the volume *Biopolitics and Ancient Thought* elaborate and evaluate the idea that modern biopolitics can be traced back to the political thought of Greek antiquity. I will concentrate on a couple of articles that connect directly with Ojakangas' project. Although she has critical reservations, Sara Brill acknowledges the legitimacy of Ojakangas' line of inquiry. Regarding Aristotle, she writes: "Aristoteles' emphasis on engineering the bodily as well as the physical character of citizens recommends comparison with contemporary theories of biopolitics" (Cimono and Backman, 2016: 16). Adriel Trott is more skeptical as to the biopolitical character of Aristotle's thought. A fundamental issue indirectly raised by her contribution concerns the understanding of Aristotelian

definition of the human being as a *zôon politikon* (political animal). Ojakangas glosses this term in the following way: “*zôon politikon* is not a legal subject, let alone a political animal in the modern sense of the ‘political’, but a definition of human being as an animal to whom it is natural to live in an organized community seeking for common good, just like it is natural for bees and ants to live in such a community” (Ojakangas 2016, 7). This gloss, however, is potentially seriously misleading. On an Aristotelian conception, it is distortive to focus merely on the generic likeness between the sociability of humans and ants rather than on the specific kind of sociability that is characteristic of us, and which Aristotle thinks must be understood in light of our nature as animals with *logos*, i.e., animals with a capacity for reason that can be expressed in discourse. It is the shared perception of justice as it is realized in the pursuit of virtue that is the foundation of human political life (Pol. 1.2.1253a15–17), and this perception is made possible by the possession of *logos* (Pol. 1.2.1253a13–15). The upshot is that the specificity of Aristotle’s politics is determined by a conception of human nature as mediated with *logos*. This whole dimension disappears in Ojakangas’ analysis, and it threatens to reduce the categories of Aristotelian political philosophy, such as law and constitution, to inculcated behavioral norms, similar to what is found in Ojakangas’ interpretation of Plato. Trott emphasizes this last point: “While the social norm works through the disciplinary power circulating through everyone in the community, aiming to produce a kind of normalized behavior, Aristotle’s law works to institute the deliberations of the citizens regarding what should constitute their goals as a community and how they should achieve it, which is to say, the law puts their deliberations into action” (Backman and Cimino, 112). Ojakangas’ account lacks an acknowledgement of this deliberative perspective, and he is even willing to conceive Aristotle as “a representative of sociological naturalism” (Ojakangas, 2016: 55).

Trott compellingly argues that Aristotle can in fact supply us with a model of politics that avoids making the biological body the center and ground of political life, as is the case in Ojakangas’ interpretation. In the second part of her reconstruction, however, she also contends that Aristotle’s model can avoid saddling politics with the aim of transcending, and therefore continuously excluding, our biological nature (Backman and Cimino, 108). In addressing this legitimate worry, she seemed to me dangerously close to the dubious idea that politics can be grounded in a teleological concept of nature which we cannot affirm in light of modern natural science. The contemporary philosopher John McDowell has introduced the concept of second nature, and his aim is precisely to countenance the idea that *logos* is part of our nature, namely the ‘second nature’ that we are introduced to when we are initiated into language and culture (McDowell, 1996). The concept of second nature is thus an attempt to avoid a dualistic picture which portrays us as creatures that could fundamentally transgress nature. Second nature remains nature; the concept allows the natural to include “more than the biological without excluding the biological as beyond the concern of justice and collective consideration” (Backman and

Cimino 2022, 122). McDowell's suggestion thus seems to speak to Trott's concern to avoid dualism but without falling into an untenable metaphysics undermined by modern natural science. I was left wondering how Trott's interpretation of Aristotle's concept of nature – and perhaps also Brill's reflections on the concept of *zōē* – think they manage to steer between the Scylla of dualism and the Charybdis of metaphysical naturalism.

#### IV.

Of course, a political community may prioritize the striving towards certain moral or aesthetic ideals without thereby disputing the ontological status of the human being as a biological creature. This possibility of an analysis of politics without ontological pretensions brings me to the discussion of Agamben's approach to Ancient biopolitics. Several contributions criticize Agamben's biopolitical reflections. Especially Cimino convincingly delineates severe methodological and conceptual difficulties with Agamben's approach to Ancient biopolitics as they relate to his tripartite distinction between natural life, bare life and political life. Cimino's severe critique should be seen in connection with the host of commentators who have challenged Agamben's idea that a sharp opposition between bios and *zōē* structures Aristotle's political philosophy. In my view, these criticisms challenge researchers' investigations to leave the sweeping claims about Western politics behind in favor of a more modest use of Agamben's work.

A modest interpretation would thus reject the validity of Agamben's analytic framework, which Cimino has convincingly shown to be confusing and misleading. Instead, a modest approach might begin with the following question: How has the Western tradition of thought conceived the conditions for human beings to be acknowledged as members of a political community? One way to pursue this question would be to inquire into the minimal requirements human beings must be acknowledged to actualize to count as members of a political community. This would constitute 'the work of political justification', i.e., the capacities humans must actualize to justify their political existence. For Aristotle, the work human beings need to perform to be members of the political community is at the same time the work that human beings must realize to live a flourishing human life. Any life that cannot perform the work of political justification cannot perform the work of human justification either, according to his view. One form of political power, however, is the ability to deny individuals or groups of human beings the very possibility to engage in the work of political justification. Such individuals or groups are separated from the work of political justification, and in so far as their political justification is also their human justification, we could say that they were 'human beings without work', or even that they were reduced to 'bare life'. They are human beings cut off from the possibility of becoming what they are supposed to be because they are judged to be fundamentally deficient specimens. In the processes that determine this fundamental status of

inclusion and exclusion, reference is at times made to biological features, and to this extent the processes could be said to be of a biopolitical nature. In a political community, individuals or groups excluded from the work of political justification, if they co-existed with the acknowledged members of the community, would be in an ambiguous state. They would be categorically excluded from the government of the community, but precisely in virtue of this status they might still fulfill important political functions for the community. They might perform the role of communal scapegoats, or they could have a pedagogic function of deterrence, making vivid what lies beyond the margin of the struggle for political recognition. Such excluded groups could also perform valuable labor for the community as slaves. These would all be roles that could be performed in virtue of their exclusion as ways of being included as excluded. In cases where the role of the excluded was sufficiently important for the political community, the exclusion might even be described as a condition of possibility for political life itself.

From this perspective, we can perhaps after all make sense of passages such as the following from *The Use of Bodies*. Here Agamben aims to recapitulate his analysis of Aristotle's conception of slavery:

"The slave [...] is the human being without work who renders possible the realization of the work of the human being, [it is] that living being who, though being human, is excluded – and through this exclusion, included – in humanity, so that human beings can have a human life, which is to say a political life" (Agamben 2015, 23).

## V.

In short, I think Cimino has added further reasons to be skeptical of Agamben's self-conception, according to which he provides the categorial framework to capture the ontology of Western politics as such. A modest interpretation would instead conceive Agamben's reflections upon biopolitics as inspiration for investigating a specific, albeit fundamental dimension of both Ancient and modern political thought and practice: The problems of political and human justification and their interconnection. This modest approach might develop into a normative reflection on how governmental practice should properly respond to the problem of political and human justification and in this way engage in conversation with other positions within normative political philosophy. The modest approach might also be developed into an empirical and historically informed analysis of how contemporary forms of governmental theory and practice implicitly or explicitly address the problems of political and human justification. Agamben's thought would in either case be reduced to a point of departure rather than a totalizing framework for understanding the nature of Western politics.

Agamben's latest writings on the pandemic, however, have demonstrated his unwillingness to take a modest approach, let alone develop it into either a normative argument

or an empirical analysis that clearly delimits its aims and assumptions. Instead he remains content with bluntly applying the extreme scenario of fascist biopolitics to the case of the coronavirus. His latest intervention not only expresses a rejection of all forms of public health interventions as profoundly illegitimate without any empirical analysis or normative argument. His pandemic writings also, now more clearly than in earlier hyperbolic intimations, express a will to reduce, again without analysis or argument, any state backed partial suspension of civil liberties, regardless of its justification, to a new version of fascist biopolitics.

As for Foucault, Ojakangas convincingly demonstrates that the choice to avoid classical Greek political philosophy in a genealogy of modern biopolitical thought can be questioned. Despite the severe distortions in Ojakangas' interpretation mentioned above, he succeeds in singling out distinctly biopolitical elements in Plato's and Aristotle's thought. What Ojakangas overlooks, however, is the analytical value of the trajectory which Foucault did take when he turned to the relations between political economy and biopolitics, especially in his investigations of liberalism and neoliberalism. In the mid-seventies, Foucault developed his reflections from their attachment to a conception of disciplinary power and instead began to focus on the problems of security and population as it appeared in the works of political economy as well as political and economic thought more broadly. It is true that the lectures from 1979, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, disappoints the reader who hopes for a direct conceptual and historical development of biopolitics; the concept is barely mentioned in the lectures. Foucault instead devoted his time to reflections on liberal and neoliberal governmentality, with its characteristic focus on facilitating the optimization of economic processes through market-veridiction, and the governmental stimulation of an entrepreneurial and opportunistic form of subjectivity. Foucault's reflections culminate in the now famous analyses of human capital theory and neoliberal economic sociology within the Chicago School of Law and Economics. Still, even if the term 'biopolitics' is absent, the lectures can be read as Foucault's proposal for a framework for analyses of contemporary liberal biopolitics.

The governmental approach to the pandemic confirms this reading. No doubt, the economic presuppositions of neoliberal governmentality, not least the idea that the state, far from minimizing itself, should maximize its attempt to govern relentlessly and comprehensively for the market, was initially challenged when the pandemic broke out, giving way to a Hobbesian approach that more or less ruthlessly used the powers of the state to secure its subjects. To some degree, the characteristic Hobbesian questions of basic social order and trust in state power to secure this order were perceived to be at stake in the initial phases of the pandemic. Still, as the months went on, more and more economic advisors within and outside state institutions, as well more and more pundits and politicians, began to suggest a more 'balanced' approach which would take more fully into account the costs of lockdown. At some point, the conclusions of economically informed



political expertise began to sound like that of the libertarian critics of lockdown and mask mandates: “let Covid rip”. The economic approach did not use such vulgar slogans and argued for this conclusion by way of characteristic cost-benefit analyses and by emphasizing the danger of undermining vital economic processes in society rather than by focusing upon the principled unacceptability of lockdown and mask mandates due to alleged infringements upon rights and freedoms. In so far as an alliance between rights-oriented libertarians and economic utility-oriented neoliberals existed, it was always fragile, and it symptomatically broke down in several countries when state backed vaccine mandates were introduced. Faced with requirements of vaccination or testing in order to go to work, university or school, the libertarian right wing, in some cases, resorted to frivolous comparisons between the vaccine policies and fascist forms of biopolitics. Here they could find embarrassing support in Agamben’s writings on the pandemic. It is worth noticing, however, that we can acknowledge Agamben’s embarrassment while at the same time insisting that the pandemic has shown the continued relevance of his basic questions concerning political and human justification within the economic horizon of neoliberal biopolitics which Foucault brought into analytic focus.

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### Author info

Morten S. Thaning

[mst.bhl@cbs.dk](mailto:mst.bhl@cbs.dk)

Associate Professor (Philosophy)

Department of Business Humanities and Law

Copenhagen Business School

Denmark