

## Community, Immunity, Biopolitics

Roberto Esposito | Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane

1. Community, immunity, biopolitics. What is the relationship between these three terms, around which my work has been articulated in recent years? Is it possible to connect them in a relationship, which goes beyond a mere succession of different concepts or lexicons? I believe not only that it is possible but also that it is necessary. Indeed, I believe that each term reaches its fullest meaning only in relation to the other two. But let us begin with an historical fact, briefly recalling the passage through which the two semantics, first that of community and then that of biopolitics, followed each other within our contemporary philosophical debate. It is at the end of the Eighties that in France and Italy a discourse on the category of community has been developed. This discourse presented itself as a radical deconstruction of the way the term-concept of community has been adopted by the whole twentieth century philosophy, first by the organicist sociology of *Gemeinschaft*, then by the various ethics of communication, and lastly by the American neo-communitarianism. Despite the conspicuous differences between them, these three conceptions of community were connected by a tendency, that we could define as metaphysical, to think the notion of community in a substantialist and subjectivist sense. Community was understood, indeed, as that substance able to connect certain subjects with each other by giving them a common identity. In this way, community appeared conceptually linked to the figure of the 'proper' [*proprio*]: either understood as the appropriation of what is common [*comune*], or as the communication of what is 'proper' [i.e., one's own] [*proprio*], in both cases community remained defined by a reciprocal belonging [*appartenenza*]. Its members finished up having in common their 'proper', and to be the owners [*proprietari*] of their 'common'.

It was against this conceptual short-circuit, through which the common came to be reversed in its logical contrary, that is to say the 'proper', that several books appeared in a rapid succession: *Inoperative Community* by Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Unavowable Community* by Maurice Blanchot, *Coming Community* by Giorgio Agamben and my *Communitas. The Origin and Destiny of Community*. What gives these books the same tone is a sort of distortion of the previous semantics, in the sense, even literal, that the community does not refer to a property or to its members' belonging, but to a constitutive otherness instead, which differentiates the community even from itself, subtracting it from every identitarian connotation. The subjects of this community, as it is defined in these works, result to be unified more by a fault [*faglia*] crossing and contaminating them than by a substance or a *res*. In particular, in the book written by Nancy, who has opened such a perspective by following a path marked by the Heideggerian *Mitsein* and the Batailleian *être avec*, community is not conceived of as something that relates determined subjects, but rather as the Being itself of the relation. To

say, precisely as Nancy claims, that community is not a common 'being', but the very being 'in common' of an existence which coincides with the exposition to otherness, means to put all the substantialist declinations, of particular and universal, subjective and objective characters to an end. However, despite the theoretical fecundity of such a passage, a problem remains unresolved. By subtracting community from the horizon of subjectivity, Nancy has made its articulation with politics extremely problematic –if only because of the evident difficulty of imagining a kind of politics totally external to the subjective dimension– thus keeping the community in a necessarily impolitical dimension. In this way the discourse on community has kept oscillating between a political declination but with a regressive result –that is that of the small homelands of land and blood– and another modality theoretically fecund but politically untranslatable. My opinion is that at the very core of the difficulty to politically decline this new notion of community, there is the tendency, led by the theorists of community and particularly by Nancy, to look at community from the point of view of the *cum* rather than that of the *munus*. It is as if the absolute privilege assigned to the figure of the *relation* [*relazione, rapporto*] would erase the most relevant content –that is the object itself of the reciprocal exchange– and thus, with it, also its potential political meaning.

The contribution which I have personally attempted to bring into discussion, represents a genealogical movement towards the origin of the concept. In my opinion, the very idea of community is itself the key to avoid any impolitical drift of the concept and safeguard its political pregnancy, but only on the condition of going back through its history, to the Latin etymology of *communitas* and, before that, to the term from which this one derives, that is that of *munus*. From this assumption, I have started a process of interpretation which considerably grows away from that one undertaken by French deconstructionists, at least with regard to a very precise point, despite the fact that I agree with their needs. While assuming the *pars destruens* of the deconstructionists' discourse against identitarian communitarianisms, I have turned my attention, within the concept of community, from the area of the *cum*, on which Nancy has concentrated his analysis, to that of the *munus*, which in some way he has left in the background. The complex and bivalent meaning of *munus* as 'law' and 'gift' –and, more precisely, as law of the unilateral gift to the others– allowed me to maintain, and even to stress, the semantic of the expropriation already elaborated by deconstructionists. That is to say, to fully belong to the originary *communitas* means to renounce one's most precious substance, in other words one's individual identity, in a progressive process of openness to the other-than-self [*altro da sé*]. Nevertheless, the meaning of *munus* at the same time allowed me to take a step forward, or, better said, a lateral step, which re-opened a way towards the political dimension.

The paradigm of immunity is situated at the very core of this passage, difficult to reach from the side of the *cum*, because immunity precisely derives its meaning, negative or privative, from the term *munus*. If *communitas* is what links its members together in a

reciprocal commitment to donate, *immunitas*, on the contrary, is what unloads from this load and exonerates from this *onus* [*onere*]. If community refers to something general and open, immunity, or immunization, regards the particularity of a situation defined by its subtraction to a common condition. This is evident under the juridical profile, according to which to have immunity –parliamentary or diplomatic– means not to be subjected to a jurisdiction concerning all the other citizens, that is with derogation from a law which is common. Similarly, we recognize this characteristic of immunity in its medical and biological meaning, according to which immunization, being natural or induced, implies the organism's capacity to resist, through its antibodies, an infection caused by an external virus. When overlapping the two semantics, the juridical and the medical one, it is possible to conclude that, if the community determines the rupture of the individual's identity protection barriers, immunity constitutes a way to construct such barriers in a defensive and offensive shape, against any threatening external element. This may apply both to the individuals and to the communities, the latter considered, in this case, in their particular dimension, as immunized against any foreign element that seems to threaten them from the outside. From here derives that double bind inherent in the immunitarian dynamics [*dinamiche immunitarie*] –already typical of modernity, and today more and more extended to all the spheres of individual and collective experience, real or imaginary. When immunity is brought beyond a certain threshold, though it is necessary to the preservation of our life, it forces the life itself into a sort of cage where we end up losing not only our freedom, but also the very sense of our existence –that is to say, we lose existence's openness to its outside, openness which has been named *communitas*. This is the contradiction that I have tried to emphasize in my work: what protects the body –whether individual, social or political– is what at the same time prevents its development. And this is what, beyond a certain threshold, may destroy it. In Walter Benjamin's words, we could say that a large dose of immunization represents the sacrifice of the living that is of every qualified life, to the logic of mere survival. This is the reduction of life to its bare biological matter. We can easily see how, given this hermeneutic key, the category of community can acquire a new political valence, without falling again into a substantialist metaphysics. In the very moment in which the immunitarian *dispositif* [*dispositivo*] becomes the syndrome, at the same time defensive and offensive, of our time, community presents itself as the assigned place, that is the real and symbolic form, of the resistance to the excess of immunization which endlessly captures us. If immunity tends to enclose our existence in circles or fences, which do not communicate with each other, the community, more than a bigger circle which comprehends them, is rather an opening which, cutting the boundaries, mixes human experiences, freeing them from their securing obsession [*ossessione assicurativa*].

2. But –and here we engage with the second issue we mentioned– the politics we are speaking about cannot be other than a form of biopolitics. When the phenomenon of immunity inscribes

# EMISFÉRICA

---

itself at the crossroads between law and biology, between medical procedure and juridical protection, it is also evident that the politics determined by such a phenomenon, in the shape of action or reaction, will be in a direct relationship with biological life. But the relationship between biopolitics on one side, and the oppositional dialectic community-immunity on the other side, is something even more intrinsic –in the sense that it regards the meaning, otherwise elusive, of all the dynamics of various natures related to the biopolitical paradigm. We are not going to reconstruct here the recent history of this paradigm– stemming from the Foucauldian courses of the Seventies and primarily continued by Italian interpretations, first by Giorgio Agamben and Toni Negri, who developed in an original manner the extraordinary insights of Foucault.

However, the different meanings that this category of biopolitics assumed in these authors' reflections do refer to a difficulty, or rather to a fundamental antinomy – somehow already recognizable, even in a latent state, in the Foucauldian texts –essentially consisting in a failed or insufficient articulation between the two poles of *bios* and politics, which compose the term biopolitics. It is as if these two poles, instead of being welded in a single semantic block, were thought separately and only later related to one another. What I am saying is that the radical divergence between a kind of negative interpretation, if not apocalyptic, and another, on the contrary, notably optimistic, even euphoric interpretation of biopolitics, has its roots in a semantic gap, already present in the Foucauldian works, between two layers of sense never perfectly integrated together within this concept, and rather destined to split it in two reciprocally incompatible parts, or at least compatible only through a violent subjugation [*assoggettamento*] of one layer to the dominion of the other. In this way, either life appears as being captured as if imprisoned, by a power destined to reduce it to a simple biological matter, or else politics risks to be dissolved in the rhythm of a life that endlessly reproduces itself beyond the historical contradictions by which it is invested. In the first case the biopolitical regime tends not to move away from the sovereign one, which appears to constitute an internal fold of the former. In the second case, such a regime emancipates itself from the sovereign one to the point it loses contact with its deepest genealogy. As I have already mentioned, Foucault himself never chose between these two extreme possibilities, oscillating between one and the other, never reaching a definitive resolution. Both the relation between the sovereign regime and the biopolitical regime, and that between modernity and totalitarianism, remain, in their categorical systems, as overshadowed by such underlying undecidability regarding the meaning itself, and even more the outcomes, of what Foucault himself defined 'biopolitics' or, without attributing special significance to this lexical difference, 'biopower'. As I have already observed, my impression is that in the formidable Foucauldian conceptual *dispositif*, something is missing –let us say an intermediate link or a juncture segment–, something capable of connecting these different configurations of the concept of biopolitics and, before that, the two fundamental polarities of life and politics in a shape more organic and complex than that one, still hesitant, which he activated in his

pioneering works.

It is exactly this constitutive link that I have tried to individuate within the paradigm of immunization. This paradigm constitutes, in its biological and juridical double declination, the exact point of tangency between the sphere of life and that of politics. This gives us the chance to bridge the distance between the two extreme interpretations of biopolitics –that is between its deadly and euphoric versions. Rather than two opposite and irreconcilable ways to understand the category of biopolitics, these two interpretations are, on the contrary, two internal possibilities of a horizon which is unified by the bivalent character, both positive and negative, protective and destructive, of the immunitarian dispositif. Once established the double profile of the immunization process –that is, at the same time protection and negation of life–, even the paradigm of biopolitics, or biopower, finds in the process of immunization a more congruous definition. The negative meaning which from time to time has connoted the biopolitical paradigm, is not the outcome of the violent subjugation that power exerts from the external on life, rather it is the contradictory way through which life tries to defend itself from the perils by which it is threatened, this way contradicting other, equally important, needs. When immunity, which is necessary to the preservation of individual and collective life –since no one would be alive without an immune system 1[*sistema immunitario*] inside our body– assumes an exclusive and excluding shape with respect to any environmental and human otherness, it ends up contradicting the development of life itself.

In other words, what is at stake here is the difference –on which Derrida has otherwise insisted– between immunization and auto-immunization. Everybody knows what the auto-immune diseases are. They have to do with those pathological forms intervening when the immune system of our bodies becomes strong enough to turn against itself, causing the death of the body. Obviously this is not always the case. Normally the immune system is limited to a conservative function, not turning against the body which hosts it. But when this happens, it is not originated by an external cause, rather it is an effect of the immunitarian mechanism itself, intensified to a degree no longer bearable. A similar dynamic is also recognizable in the political body, when the barriers that protect against the outside cause a greater risk than the one they are made to avoid. As it is well known, one of the major risks of our actual societies lies exactly in an excessive demand of protection, which in some cases tends to produce an impression of peril, whether real or imaginary, whose only finality is to enable more powerful means of preventive defence. This articulation, which follows an anti-historical logic, between the biopower and the immunization paradigms, allows us on the one hand to clarify the meaning of the concept of biopolitics, on the other hand to establish an internal distinction between its negative connotation and another, on the contrary, potentially affirmative. The fact that, throughout the entire course of the last century, the first one resulted to be greatly prevalent on the second one, does not mean that the latter could not rise again.

But first things first. It has often been wondered what is, and whether there is, a true specificity

of the category of biopolitics, since politics has always dealt, somehow, with life even in its most strict biological sense. Were the agrarian politics in ancient Rome, or the use of slave bodies in the ancient empires, nothing but forms of biopolitics? And if so, what does distinguish them, in the essence, from what has been defined with the term biopolitics? And yet, does biopolitics arise with modernity, as Foucault was inclined to believe, or does it have a longer and deeper genealogy? We could answer these questions by saying that, every policy, when considered from the point of view of its living matter, has been and will be a form of biopolitics. However, it is the immunitarian characterization which determines, first, the modern intensification of biopolitics and, later, during the totalitarian phase, the thanatopolitical drift. As Nietzsche saw clearly, what we call 'modernity' is nothing but the meta-language which allowed to respond in immunitarian terms to several demands of preventive protection, emerged from the deepness of life itself, when the promises of transcendent salvation were failing. If the paradigm of immunization helps us to grasp the structural link between modernity and biopolitics, the paradigm of auto-immunization lets us to establish the relation, as well as the element of discontinuity, between modern biopolitics and Nazi thanatopolitics. Regarding the latter, not only the racial defence of German people became the principal aim of German politics –in a way that affected their survival to the death of its internal and external enemies– but at some point, when the defeat seemed to be unavoidable, the order of its self-destruction was given. In that case the immunitarian syndrome assumed a fully auto-immunitarian connotation and biopolitics came to perfectly coincide with thanatopolitics.

3. As it is now clear, the end of Nazism –and then after half a century the end of Soviet communism– did not imply the end of biopolitics, which is now permanently settled in contemporary societies substituting the old ideologies. It is not difficult to recognize its growing presence in all the areas of internal and international politics, alongside a growing lack of distinction between public and private. From the health sphere to that of biotechnologies, from the ethnic question to the environmental one, the only source of political legitimacy nowadays appears to be that of preservation and implementation of life. It is precisely in this context that the necessity of an affirmative biopolitics reappears with a new urgency. It would be something like a horizon of sense where life would not be an object anymore, but in some way a subject of politics. How could we draw its profile? Where are its symptoms to be found? With which objectives? This is an issue, or indeed a range of issues, that are surely not easy. To have gone through the dramatic, and sometimes tragic experiences of a negative biopolitics, or even of a manifest thanatopolitics, it is not enough to identify, by contrast, its opposite. It is not possible to just turn various deadly practices –or, in an extreme sense, of giving death– into something positive, or not simply to contrast the spread of these practices in the poorest part of the world. What has to be taken is a step forward, in order to conceive in a completely different way the link between constraints and needs, between the expansion of financial market and the protection of the social, cultural and generational weakest layer. In this work across the board, which is possible only through a new alliance between national and international policies, between political parties and movements, and between individual and collective subjects, a first point of orientation, that would not simply be theoretical, can be found exactly in the dialectic

# EMISFÉRICA

---

between community and immunity I have previously mentioned. It is in some way, and indeed in every possible way, a matter of overturning the relation of power between the 'common' and the 'immune'. That is, it is a matter of separating, through the common, immunitarian protection from destruction of life; of thinking differently the function of the immune systems, treating them much more as kind of filters of the relationship between the internal and external, rather than as exclusionary barriers. How? Starting from which presuppositions? With which tools? The problem must be faced through a double level: on the one hand, from the level of the deactivation of the apparatuses of negative immunization, and on the other hand, from that of the activation of new spaces of the common.

Let us begin from the first point. We have already seen how the abnormal growth of control and subjugation *dispositifs* determines a corresponding decrease of individual and collective freedom. Dividing barriers, blocks to the circulation of ideas, languages and information, surveillance mechanisms activated in the more sensitive areas of a city, constitute more and more forms of devitalization [*devitalizzazione*], which are, on the one hand, necessary to avoid, and on the other hand to be countered with all legitimate means. This is particularly difficult. First because the contemporary *dispositifs*, e.g. the biometrics measures taken in border crossings, the photoelectric cells framing every our movement, or the wiretappings recording our words or messages, are also aimed at the protection of ourselves and society. But it is difficult for another, more fundamental, reason. That is because, as Foucault has perfectly explained, the subjectification [*soggettivazione*], which gives sense to our practices, always passes through a form of subjugation –so that escaping from subjugation always involves an effect of de-subjectification [*desoggettivazione*]. Therefore, the exodus from these *dispositifs*, or their deactivation, always involves a double result: we have at the same time liberation and isolation, that is emancipation and impoverishment. For instance, it is obviously possible to live outside the internet network, but it implies, as an effect, the disorientation with respect to the globalized world. A preventive discrimination among *dispositifs* of prohibition, *dispositifs* of control and *dispositifs* of subjugation, should be done before producing their deactivation, or simply before being captured by them. That is, a discrimination among systems capable of facilitating our collective and individual experience, and apparatuses which, on the contrary, reduce its vital power. Or even, a zone of silence within a communication system now extended to every moment of our lifetime should be preserved as well.

But this is not enough. This is nothing but the negative side –as it is an individual subtraction– of a strategy which must be played even within its positive side. The production of spaces, spheres, and common dimensions, more and more threatened by the intrusiveness of their opposite, must be placed together with the practices of unbinding the immunitarian binds. When reflecting on the term and concept of 'common', we can see it being characterized by three different contraries, but which all converge in a contrastive

# EMISFÉRICA

---

effect –these are the concepts of ‘proper’, ‘private’, and ‘immune’. Each one of them opposes itself in a different way to the semantic of the common, that is in the different but convergent shapes of appropriation, privatization and immunization. These are three ways of dissolution of the social link, but before that, of that idea of ‘common good’ more and more reduced in intensity and extension within a world which still wants itself to be global. Recently, not only philosophers but even lawyers have started a semantic reconstruction of the concept of ‘common good’, which is connected to those, opposite and specular, of private good and public good. The law itself arose in Rome as private law, destined to ratify in a juridically codified shape the originary appropriation of things, and even of certain human beings reduced to the status of things, by those who by force proclaimed themselves as the owners. This dynamic of appropriation was joined, in modernity, by that of making public the goods assigned to the control and usufruct of the State organisms. In this way, the space of the common, being not appropriable neither by single individuals nor by the State, had become increasingly narrow, coinciding with the zone, juridically undecidable, of the *res nullius*, that is of the ‘thing of nobody’ [*la cosa di nessuno*]. When the general immunitarian mechanism got started, such a retreat of the common –under the convergent pressure of the proper, the private and the public– became even more sweeping. Immunity did not merely strengthen the boundaries of the proper, but did progressively invest the public sphere. Sovereignty effectively proved to be the first and fundamental immunitarian dispositif together with the categories, preventively immunized, of property and liberty.

When in the twilight of early modernity, these categories came into direct contact with the horizon of biological life, the erosion of the common good –that is that of everyone and no one, and of no one because it is of everyone– became even more intense. The first resources to be privatized were the environmental ones, e.g. water, earth, air, mountains, rivers; then the city spaces, public buildings, streets, cultural heritage; lastly the intellectual resources, the spaces of communication and the information media. All of this, waiting for the organs of the biological life to be legally put on sale and bought by the best buyer. With the invention of the State, that is to say the biggest political *dispositif*, modernity had already tended to exclude the common good, that is that of everybody, or at least to progressively reduce it in favour of a dialectic between private and public, gradually destined to occupy the whole social scene. If we read authors such as Locke or Grotius, we can see the theorization of the necessity to subdivide a world given to everybody by God, that is given to nobody in particular, into what belongs to single owners and what belongs to the State. The concept of *demanio* [State property], meaning the public property of the State, has been for a long time and yet not exhausted, the complementary –and not the opposite– aspect of private property. This kind of making public of the private has become, together with what we usually call globalization, increasingly intertwined with the inverse phenomenon of the privatization of the public, in a way that seems to exhaust and even exclude from the horizon of possibilities, something like a common good. This becomes even more relevant when, with the current biopolitical turn, each good, whether material or intellectual, corporeal or technological, comes to regard, directly or

indirectly, the sphere of biological life, including in it intellectual and linguistic resources, the symbolic and imaginary, needs and desires.

It is exactly on these grounds that the struggle for an affirmative biopolitics must be engaged and possibly won. It must be started by breaking the pincer between public and private which threaten to crush the common, in the attempt, on the contrary, to enlarge its space. The conflict opened against the project to privatize water, the one concerning the energy sources, or the discussion regarding the exclusive patents owned by pharmaceutical companies, which prevent the spread of low cost medicines to the poorest areas of the planet, they all go in this direction. This is, of course, a difficult struggle –especially because we should not make the mistake of abandoning the public space in favour of the common, risking at the same time facilitating the privatization process. Neither we should confuse the common good with that one pertaining to the sovereignty of the State, or to any departmental administrations, regulated by the preliminary juridical subdivision between public and private. The problem is that as of right now, there are no juridical statutes or codes protecting the common instead of the private, the proper and the immune. In fact, even before adequate laws, there is neither a satisfactory lexicon to speak about something –as the common, which is actually excluded, first from the modernization process, and then from that of globalization. The common is neither the public –dialectically opposed to the private– nor the global, which rather corresponds to the local. The common is something largely unknown, and even refractory to our conceptual categories, which have been held for a long time by the general immunitarian dispositif. However, the challenge for an affirmative biopolitics, *of* life and no longer *on* life, is precisely played on this possibility. That is on the capability to think, even before acting, within this horizon. To think around, or rather within the common. It is towards this direction that, as well as through the category of ‘impersonal’, my research has been oriented through the recent years.

---

*Translated from the Italian by Michela Russo, published originally in [Política Común](#)*

---

**Roberto Esposito** is Vice Director of the Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane, Full Professor of Theoretical Philosophy, and the coordinator of the doctoral programme in Philosophy of the same Institute. He was one of the founders of the European Political Lexicon Research Centre and of the International Centre for a European Legal and Political Lexicon. He is co-editor of *Filosofia Politica* published by il Mulino, the series 'Per la Storia della Filosofia Politica' published by Franco Angeli, the series 'Storia e teoria politica' published by Bibliopolis, and the series 'Comunità e Libertà' published by Laterza. He is editor of the 'Teoria e Oggetti' series published by Liguori and also acts as a philosophy consultant for publishers Einaudi. His last monograph, "Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana"(forthcoming for Stanford UP), is dedicated to Italian philosophical thought, and aims at creating a historical and theoretical background for the definition of the notion of "Italian Theory".

---

**Translator's Notes:**

# EMISFÉRICA

---

1. Esposito employs the expression “immune system” maintaining its basic sense of preservation of life, constantly shifting between the individual and the collective level, that is between its current biological meaning, as that body inner system of physical barriers and defensive processes able to protect the body itself against pathogen agents, and its metaphorical transposition within the social and political sphere, understandable in some respects as a collective body, and in this way referring to that system of apparatuses, dispositifs and strategies pertaining any society, which controls, polices and defends the socio-political body. See Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas. The Protection and Negation of Life*. John Wiley & Sons, forthcoming in 2012 [Translator’s Note].