“The Value of the Surface”:
Expanding Arendt’s Contribution to Biopolitics

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ABSTRACT

It has become a commonplace to consider Hannah Arendt a theorist of biopolitics. Her reception in the literature has nevertheless been somewhat narrow, focused mostly on her analysis of totalitarianism, on the one hand, and the notion of natality as resistance to biopolitics, on the other. The present paper seeks to expand her potential contribution to biopolitics by making two claims in particular. First, it is argued that capitalist and consumerist societies, not totalitarian ones, are the paradigmatic examples of ‘biopolitical’ forms of rule, which the paper further identifies as process-based forms of administration. Second, it is argued that Arendt’s discussion of the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann opens up largely under-examined venues for thinking the relationship between life, the body, and politics. Indeed, she presents the outlines of what might be termed affirmative politics of life’s surface.

Keywords: life, appearance, body, affirmative biopolitics, totalitarianism

1. INTRODUCTION

It has recently become a commonplace to consider Hannah Arendt a theorist of biopolitics – a term she would have probably found nonsensical. At least since Agamben’s claim, in Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, that Arendt initiated biopolitical analysis “twenty years before The History of Sexuality”, her ideas have been brought into dialogue with Foucault and others. She has also been used by contemporary theorists of biopolitics such as Agamben and Esposito, as well as several commentators drawing from their work. Given that she is even featured in the 2013 biopolitics reader (Campbell – Sitze 2013), her position as one of the key thinkers of biopolitics seems broadly accepted.

The aim of the present paper is to re-evaluate the way Arendt has mostly been received in the literature on biopolitics. I argue that the current literature has not utilized the full scope of her analyses, but rather focused on a relatively narrow area of topics, both in terms of critical analysis and in search for “politics beyond biopolitics”. Most of the commentaries focus – albeit not exclusively – on the thanatopolitical aspects of biopolitics and totalitarianism. By the same token, they present Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism as an argument about the emergence of Nazism from liberalism. This both distorts her emphasis on novelty of totalitarianism and, somewhat ironically, directs attention away from the freedom defying tendencies of liberalism itself.
Furthermore, many authors have argued that Arendt’s notion of natality can be conceived as her reply to, i.e. attempt to provide a subjectivity capable of overcoming, the biopolitical logic of modernity. This too, I contend, is a one-sided interpretation. Specifically, it ignores Arendt's revolution-inspired notion of democratic institution-building and her late reflections on the phenomenology of (biological) life.

To correct these shortcomings, the paper proceeds along the following steps. First, it gives a general overview of the existing literature that builds on the connection between Arendt and biopolitics. As already noted, I will take issue with the tendency to jump from biopolitical liberalism to thanatopolitical totalitarianism without pausing to reflect on their differences. I will also point out several weak points in the celebratory readings of natality as a form of resistance to biopolitics. The second section reopens the dialogue with Foucault, and argues that biopolitics and biopower ought not to be understood simply as “ politicization of life”. Rather, the notion should be reserved for the emergence of new rationalities of rule and governance that take their bearings from the modern understanding of life as a functional process, and its relationship to economics. Building on this specification of what biopolitics refers to, the paper makes what is perhaps its weightiest point in section three. Against much of the existing literature, I argue that Arendt did not wish to exclude life in its corporeal, material, sense from politics. Instead, following the Swiss zoologist Adolf Portmann, she presented what might be termed affirmative politics of life’s surface. Paying attention to this aspect of her thinking, I argue, opens new venues for thinking the role of life, the body, and even redistributive politics in her notion of politics. Accordingly, I will take issue with readings such as the one presented by Roberto Esposito, according to which “Arendt didn’t think the category of life thoroughly enough and therefore was unable to interpret life’s relationship with politics philosophically.” (Esposito 2006, 150). I argue, on the contrary, that Arendt does think life through – albeit not necessarily ‘philosophically’ – and provides – at least tentatively and implicitly – an account of how it relates to politics.

REFERENCES


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