Coming to “Terms” with Life

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—Roberto Esposito
Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy 13

It is not only poets and philosophers who have for centuries wondered about the meaning of life; all of us wonder about it from time to time, if not virtually all the time. But now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we seem to be asking with a new urgency such questions as “What is ‘life’?” “What keeps us alive?” “What ensures our existence (and for how long) on this planet?” “Is human life finally any different from animal life?” The Greeks used two distinct words, zoe (the life of all living things, simple life, bare life) and bios (the life of the citizen), to express two different aspects or forms of life.1 But can even these two terms suffice?

Advances in our understanding of life are being made in many different fields, from the life sciences (in particular genetics), the social sciences, politics and economics to philosophy, the arts and humanities. Increasingly we see heated debates on ethical, political and economic issues closely tied to the problem, the question of human life. These concern not only such things as the political and economic power of the pharmaceutical and medical insurance industries—e.g. in the USA, where a major national debate was sparked by Obama’s recent attempt to finally establish a national health care system—but more broadly the emergence of a “politics of life.” Perhaps even if we were not very aware of such debates we would find ourselves asking: What new and unforeseen forces may be intruding

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1 Giorgio Agamben in Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life gives us a concise explanation of the two Greek terms: “The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word ‘life.’ They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: zoe, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and bios, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1).
into and secretly controlling my/our human/nonhuman/posthuman life?

After all, from the micro-biological-political to the macro-economic-political, we have witnessed the rise of bio-medicine, bio-engineering, and bio-technology and noted that they have been increasingly invading our life at every level. These new biotechnologies make the boundary between organism and “artificial life” ever more imperceptible. How are we then to evaluate our “prosthetic” life”? We now extend our bodies via electronic devices, reassemble our bodies with transplanted organs, and duplicate our life through cloning and reproductive technologies. We are becoming, or already are, “cyborgs”; we are becoming “posthuman.” All these biotechnologies have raised major ethical questions about what life is (hence the ethics-of-human-cloning debate), when it begins (the ethics-of-abortion debate), when as well as how it should end (the ethics-of-euthanasia debate). And indeed we are in dire need of a new bio-ethics and construct a new bio-subjectivity in this era of the new bios.

How are we to “come to terms” with life? How are we to work and negotiate with the ever-multiplying terms of/about life? How are we to deal with life in terms, in words, as thinkers have done all the time, from ancient till now? What is biopower? What is biopolitics? When was it born? Does the term biopolitics designate a paradigm shift in the history of political theory? In his seminal book, Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy, Roberto Esposito has remarked that “Recently, not only has the notion of ‘biopolitics’ moved to the center of international debate, but the term has opened a completely new phase in contemporary thought” (13). Indeed, the notion and its wide circulation have produced a huge “surplus value” in the discursive market or industry. How are we going to interpret this phenomenon and re-think about life after we enter this new phase of thought? How then are we now to define, interpret, understand concepts of law and polis (government, nation-state), state power, capitalism, neoliberalism, and globalization, in relation to human—and also earthly plant and animal—life?

In what follows, we will first take “a journey through life” by drawing a few contour lines and teasing out some strands of thought which are of concern to major bio-thinkers and resonate throughout modern discursive practice on life. This journey is more a preliminary survey than a genealogy of modern biopolitical thought. We will then situate the five special issue articles within this wide spectrum of thought on life and biopolitics. In the end, we will broach or better conjure up “the hauntology of life” as our uncanny approach to examine the question of life in general.
I. A Journey Through Life

In this section we will take a journey to survey the interpretations of life. Rather than offering a comprehensive overview of the existing literature on biopolitics, we intend to highlight some of the decisive moments in the relatively recent development of biopolitical discourse by looking at the ideas of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Roberto Esposito, since many attempts at the interpretation of biopolitics respond in particular to their theorization of life.

Nietzsche is not only a precursor of postmodern thinking but also a forerunner of life philosophy. Many of his reflections and meditations on life have continued to reverberate throughout the current thinking on modernity and postmodernity. As Esposito perceptively puts it:

From these initial considerations it is already clear that Nietzsche, without formulating the term [biopolitics], anticipated the entire biopolitical course that Foucault then defined and developed: from the centrality of the body as the genesis and termination of sociopolitical dynamics, to the founding role of struggle and also of war, to the configuration of juridical-institutional orders, to finally the function of resistance as the necessary counter point to the deployment of power. (Bios 85)

We will thus make Nietzsche our starting point.

1. Nietzsche: The Power of Life to Will Beyond Itself

How to embrace life in its fullness? Do we want to become a Nietzschean affirmer of life? To be the ever-controversial Nietzschean Übermensch, the extra-ordinary “Yes-sayer” who can overcome nihilism and enthusiastically embrace life in spite of the inevitability of hardship, suffering and death? For some, Nietzsche is a philosopher of life, be it aesthetic life, historical life, political life, or ethical life. As Keith Ansell-Pearson writes:

Nietzsche is an ambiguous and paradoxical thinker whose writings never cease to disturb, provoke, and inspire, even when they challenge one’s innermost convictions. . . . He is important because
he was, first and foremost, a philosopher of life, not because he is now academically respectable and has all the dubious status of a “modern master.” Nietzsche’s writing deals with the most important questions about what it means to be a human being (he defines man as the questioning animal). For Nietzsche, however, this existential questioning about human identity cannot be separated from an understanding of history (especially for morality), of culture, and of politics. (1)

The term “life” plays, then, a vital role in Nietzsche’s philosophy; central to which is the idea that we must overcome ressentiment and appreciate our own place in the world.

In a sense the 19th-century German philosophers Schopenhauer (the blind will), Marx (the forces of production), Nietzsche (the will to power) and Freud (the libido) are all “life-force” philosophers, reacting against the rational abstractions of Plato, Kant, Hegel. As such they all have some relation to Darwin’s evolution theory, for which survival (and today DNA, our genes) is/are the paramount driving force. However, Nietzsche’s overman (Übermensch) is not merely conceived in terms of biological evolution, and in Beyond Good and Evil we are told that “Life itself is will to power; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent results” (§13: 21).

Thus Zarathustra’s “prophecies” of the overman are pointing to something somehow beyond or larger than the question of survival: “There is much that life esteems more highly than life itself; but out of the esteeming itself speaks the will to power” (Zarathustra II, §12, “On Self-Overcoming”: 115-12). This is akin to Nietzsche’s idea that the highest “willing” is to “will willing itself.” If Nietzsche is above all the philosopher of life, he is also thinking of “life” as the force of an active will which in a sense moves beyond the limits of life, for it is always “willing something new.” Life’s purpose is not to preserve life itself but to risk itself for an excess of power and eventually overcome itself.²

Hence in Thus Spoke Zarathustra II, life itself confides its secret to Zarathustra:

“Behold,” it said, “I am that which must always overcome itself.

² In The Gay Science, Nietzsche writes that the wish to preserve oneself is the symptom of distress. In contrast, the fundamental instinct of life “aims at the expansion of power and, wishing for that, frequently risks and even sacrifices self-preservation” (§349: 291-92).
Indeed, you call it a will to procreate or a drive to an end, to something higher, farther, more manifold: but all this is one, and one secret.” . . . “Indeed, the truth was not hit by him who shot at it with the word of the ‘will to existence’: that will does not exist. For, what does not exist cannot will; but what is in existence, how could that still want existence? Only where there is life there also will: not will to life but—thus I teach you—will to power.” (§12, “On Self-Overcoming”: 115-16)

Where one finds life, one finds will to power. The two things are coextensive or they are in truth one and the same thing. Life is neither “will to existence” nor “will to life.” Its main purpose is by no means “will to self-preservation.” The “truth” of this very life is manifested by the will itself. This double and uncanny “thing”—“life and will altogether”—seeks “to discharge its strength” (BGE, §13: 21) or its “life forces,” its power. Thus life operates according to the principle of waste and, once again, not the principle of preservation. This vision of life has anticipated and inspired Georges Bataille’s conception of “general economy” and “notion of expenditure.” The Bataillean general economy stresses that the surplus of economic energy must be squandered in excess and without reserve: “the excess of energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (21).

This vision of “life” has an unmistakably political dimension. For one thing, we have the contrast, in The Genealogy of Morals, between the overflowing generosity of the ruler’s “master morality” and the “resentment” of his subjects’ “slave morality”; theirs is an ethics of reaction (against the all-powerful master), his an ethics of purely free and active willing, of “will freely willing itself.” Here Nietzsche also equates slave morality with Christian morality and thinks western civilization has declined due to the increasing dominance of the slave morality, the Christian virtues. For Nietzsche, then, love, compassion, mercy etc. are the slave-virtues of Christianity, based on resentment and reaction, on the “low” position of suffering slaves and hence the need for camaraderie, for revolt against the master(s). This reactive attitude of the “slaves” is closely tied to the notion that the Christians are themselves “nihilists” for they choose to negate life (the active life-force), preferring rather the otherworldly “after-life”; hence Nietzsche says he is not a nihilist, not for negating life but rather for affirming it.
While some of these ideas are among the more controversial and potentially disturbing ones to be found in Nietzsche, we must keep in mind that his “will to power” is not the naked “will to political power” as such but rather the more polyvalent “will to perspectivism” or “will to power relations.” As Nietzsche writes:

Perspectivism is only a complex form of specificity. My idea is that every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (—its will to power) and to thrust back all that resists its extension. But it continually encounters similar efforts on the part of other bodies and ends by coming to an arrangement (“union”) with those of them that are sufficiently related to it: thus they then conspire together for power. And the process goes on— (WP §636: 340)

While perspectivism relates one perspective to all the other perspectives of life without their denying each other, one force relates to all the other forces of life without negation. Nietzsche’s notions of perspectivism and will to power are conceptions of life that are both differential and plural. His perspectivism allows for multiple forces and values to exist side by side, reacting to each other. Far from negating each other or canceling each other out, they interact with each other as active and reactive forces. To live is “to be in power relations,” to evaluate and re-valuate different perspectives, values, and forces of life, and eventually to “trans-valuate” all of them. Thus Nietzsche also writes: “Is not living—estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different?” (BGE, §9: 15); “And whoever must be a creator in good and evil, verily, he must first be an annihilator and break values” (BGE, §12: 116). In Twilight of the Idols, Nietzsche insists that “Life itself forces us to posit values; Life itself values through us when we posit values” (§5: 5).

The Nietzschean will to power, then, is indeed inherently “political” because it is radically “affirmative.” Esposito in his Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy affirms this point: “To assume the will to power as the fundamental vital impulse means affirming at the same time that life has a constitutively political dimension and that politics has no other object than the maintenance and expansion of life. It is precisely in the relationship between these two ultimate modes of referring to bios that the innovative and conservative, or active or reactive character of forces facing each other is established” (9-10). The Nietzschean interpretation of life as will to power yields many versions of differential interpretation, and most important of all
remains open to more active and reactive interpretations.³

2. Foucault: The Birth of Biopolitics and the Threshold of the Posthuman

The emergence of the notions of biopower and biopolitics is thought to be more directly or immediately based on Foucault’s perceptive genealogical research, his insights into the “epistemic breaks” in/of political power in 18th and 19th century Europe, than on Nietzsche’s pioneering and provocative work. As heir to Nietzsche in many ways, Foucault’s keen observations of life are registered in his genealogy of biopolitics, which marks the transformation from the sovereign thanatopolitics of “to take life or let live” to the biopolitics of “to make live and to let die” (“SMBD” 241). “From the moment that Michel Foucault reproposed and redefined the concept [biopolitics] . . .,” Esposito notes, “the entire frame of political philosophy emerged as profoundly modified” (Bios 13).

Indeed, the emergence of “life,” in the modern, biological sense of the term, from out of what Foucault calls the “disciplinary society,” marked the kairotological moment in human history. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault writes:

One knows how many times the question has been raised concerning the role of an ascetic morality in the first formation of capitalism; but what occurred in the 18th century in some Western countries, an event bound up with the development of capitalism, was a different phenomenon having perhaps a wider impact than the new morality; this was nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques. (141-42)

From this moment on, life itself appeared in a new form on the historical stage, filled with a sense of hope and glory and free of “the menace of death” (HoS 142), the “thanatopolitics” of the older forms of sovereign power. Now the human body

³ Nietzsche’s contribution to the topic of biopolitics is honored by Esposito by way of dedicating the entire Third Chapter of his Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy to Nietzsche. He explains that his purpose in doing so is “not only for his [Nietzsche’s] underlying biopolitical relevance, but because he constitutes an extraordinary seismograph of the exhaustion of modern political categories when mediating between politics and life” (9).
and its erotic power, its health and sexuality, would begin to be constituted by “the order of knowledge and power,” bound by “the sphere of political techniques,” and eventually invested in, reproduced, cared for, valorized, and managed in the name of the species (HoS 141). For Foucault, the economic growth and development of capitalism in the 18th century contributed to this epistemic break in history. At this time and for “the first time in history” (HoS 142), he writes, “Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that would be modified, and a space in which they would be distributed in an optimal manner” (HoS 142). All the more, from this critical moment on, we need a “bio-history” to document the way that “the movements of life and the process of history interfere with each other” (HoS 143).

In his work on disciplinary technologies, Foucault describes the rise in the late 18th and 19th centuries of institutions for the disciplining and surveillance of human life. He sees this in the clinical investigation of life (The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception 1963), but also in schools, factories, military academies, prisons (Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison 1975), and in the “discourse on sexuality” (The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction 1976). Foucault’s work focuses on the social and political construction of life as part of his archaeology/genealogy of power/knowledge (The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences 1966; The Archaeology of Knowledge 1969). His sees “life” as a product of power/knowledge in or working through history, and not reducible to biological terms or genetic determinism. Here, the link between Foucault and Nietzsche is easily recognizable, and it is well-known that Foucault’s trademark notions of genealogy and power relations were derived from Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morals.

To be more precise, Foucault has identified two types of power at work: a thanatopower or disciplinary power which is exercised over the bodies of individuals through techniques of surveillance, training, education, normalization, and panoptic spatial distribution, and an emergent regulatory biopower exercised upon the biological existence of the population now treated as an object of control, management, and administration.4 The invention of new techniques and forms of

4 As Foucault writes, “The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life. During the classical period, there was a rapid development of various disciplines—universities, secondary schools, barracks, workshops; there was also the emergence, in the field of political practices and economic observation, of the problem of birthrate, longevity, public health, housing, and migration. Hence there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving
knowledge was required to probe into this transformation of the new bios. As Foucault writes in “Society Must Be Defended” (1975-1976), which opens with a survey of the general features of “disciplinary power” and ends with an outline of what he calls “biopower”: “I would in fact like to trace the transformation not at the level of political theory, but rather at the level of the mechanisms, techniques, and technologies of power” (241). The contrast between these two types of power is clear in Foucault’s two important works, Discipline and Punish, the primal example of the analysis of disciplinary power, and the first volume of History of Sexuality, the main text (at the end of the book) which introduces the topics of biopower and biopolitics.5

In the exercise of biopower, biopolitics and governmentality always go hand in hand. After joining forces with capitalism, this liberal governmentality critiques the former policing governmentality, limits the state’s intervention, and eventually gives birth to a new form of political economy within the control society, neoliberalism, which Foucault begins to discuss in The Birth of Biopolitics (1978-79). Now the problem is how a government can achieve maximum efficiency through minimum intervention so that the “market,” the new truth-value of neoliberalism, can have its free rein in a society which rejects the notion of the state. It is important to note that the disciplinary power and the biopower, though constituting two poles of power technology, are not antithetical or contradictory; they complement and reinforce each other. Although different techniques of power have different prime times in history, they do not die or even fade away. They just subside, withdrawing themselves to the dimly-lit corner of the historical stage, waiting for the right time to reassert their power.

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5 This same theme is also announced at the end of “Society Must Be Defended” (1976), which includes Foucault’s lectures at the College de France from 1975 to 1976. Foucault writes: “And I think that one of the greatest transformations the political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that, I wouldn’t say exactly that sovereignty’s old right—to take life or let live—was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the power to ‘make’ live or ‘let’ die. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die” (241).
The entry of life into history or “the birth of biopolitics,” as Foucault preferred to call it later, is an epoch-making phenomenon which disrupted “the order of the classical episteme” (HoS 143), made “knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life” (HoS 143), and designated this kairological moment as a society’s “threshold of modernity” (HoS 143). Foucault describes this liminal historical moment clearly: “But what might be called a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies” (HoS 143). The entry of life into history, into modernity, also coincides with the birth of a strange new species called Man. This is a being that is finite but precisely by virtue of its finitude this all-too-human being is the source of knowledge, of meaning, and of history. At once a subject and an object, Man appears with the birth of the sciences of biology, political economy and philosophy as the being who lives, labors, speaks and subjects himself to the new ordering of power and knowledge. As Foucault puts it in The Order of Things, “Man, in the analytic of finitude, is a strange empirico-transcendental doublet, since he is a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible” (318).

Foucault says we have now (beginning from the late 20th century) passed through the time of “high modernity” and even of “anthropology” (as the “science of man”), and have at last awakened from our “anthropological sleep” (OT 340). Our task right now is to take a Nietzschean turn and pronounce the disappearance or death of man:

Perhaps we should see the first attempt at this uprooting of Anthropology—to which, no doubt, contemporary thought is dedicated—in the Nietzschean experience: by means of a philosophical critique, by means of a certain form of biologism, Nietzsche rediscovered the point at which man and God belong to one another, at which the death of the second is synonymous with the disappearance of the first, and at which the promise of the superman signifies first and foremost the imminence of the death of man. In this, Nietzsche, offering this future to us as both promise and task, marks the threshold beyond which contemporary philosophy can begin thinking again. . . . (OT 342)

What Nietzsche has proclaimed marks yet another threshold of thought; this time definitely not the “threshold of modernity” and probably not the “threshold of
postmodernity” either. This threshold, as Foucault hints, is the “threshold of the void” left by man’s disappearance and philosophy’s death. This threshold of the void heralds the return of the beginning of philosophy, a fresh new starting point of thought devoid of the Kantian anthropological point of view. As Foucault argues, “For this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think” (OT 342).

As promise and task at once, this displacement of man is not to be mourned but rather affirmed as the beginning of a new episteme and techne, a new thinking, a brave new life, and a brand new biologism and biopolitics—by a new homo socio-aeconomicus equipped with a new ethics. No longer a subject and an object of control, this new homo socio-aeconomicus will engage neoliberalism at once as a sujet and a citoyen (a “subject” and “citizen”) and involve himself in a complex dispositif or “machinination” of subjectification and subjugation, production and re-production.

After Foucault, many scholars, in turn, pick up or appropriate Foucault’s main theses, reframe their focus, and then put forth their versions of biopolitics. The three most prominent examples are as follows: Giorgio Agamben’s redeployment of the sovereign power and the emphasis of the paradigm of the bare life in Homo Sacer: Sovereignty and Bare Life (1998), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s reorientation of the biopolitical research to the reproduction of the body and affect in Empire (2000) and The Multitude (2004), and finally Roberto Esposito’s efforts to turn immunitas’s negative biopolitics as exemplified by the Nazi politics of death into an affirmative one.

3. Agamben: Between Sovereign Power and Bare Life

Giorgio Agamben is one of the thinkers who has actively engaged in re-interpreting the notion of biopolitics. In Homo Sacer: Sovereignty and Bare Life, Agamben sets out to study the mutual implication of sovereign power and biopower, and argues that the sovereign power, through its original act, employs the strategy of “inclusive exclusion” to separate bare life, zoe, from a qualified political life, bios. The “inclusion” of bare life in the political realm is thus essentially for the purpose of setting up the structure of exclusion, namely the state of exception or emergency. The sovereign power is able to work only under the circumstance that the boundaries of the state of exception are drawn. This practice is an old and still-continuing one. Thus Agamben argues that “Placing biological life at the center
of its calculations, the modern state therefore does nothing other than bring to light the secret tie uniting power and bare life, thereby reaffirming the bond . . . between modern power and the most immemorial of the *arcane imperii* [state secrets]” (*HS* 6). Agamben clarifies his intent and thesis in the following statement:

> The present inquiry concerns precisely this hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power. What this work has had to record among its likely conclusions is precisely that the two analyses cannot be separated, and that the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.* In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception. (*HS* 6)

Agamben therefore bursts the Foucauldian “myth” that there was no “life” in the modern, biological sense of the term before the so-called “threshold of modernity.” In other words, for him, what Foucault calls “the birth of biopolitics” is by no means a society’s “threshold of biological modernity” and there is no such a thing as “the entry of life into history.” This Foucauldian thesis needs to be either redressed or completed “in the sense that what characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion of *zoe* in the *polis*—which is, in itself, absolutely ancient—nor simply the fact that life as such becomes a principal object of the projections and calculations of State power” (*HS* 9). Since ancient times the exception and the rule, bare life and the political realm were mutually dependent, mutually-implicated, co-incident with each other yet mutually excluded from each other. As Agamben argues, this co-existence of “exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact” eventually enters into “a zone of irreducible indistinction” (*HS* 9).

While recognizing the fact that our biological life is entangled with our political life, Agamben broadens and “completes” the Foucauldian vision of biopolitics by highlighting the human state of “bare life.” He claims that the protagonist of his book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereignty and Bare Life*, is bare life itself, that is, “the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” (8), and his task is to assert the essential function of bare life in modern politics. Once again, debunking Foucault’s thesis that the entry of life into history is a society’s “threshold of modernity,” Agamben contends that “the inclusion of bare
life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power” (HS 6). His biopolitics is built on the endless struggle between bare life and sovereign power, a process which culminates in the “camp,” the norm of the state of exception and of the biopolitical condition of modernity. His primal example of bare life is the life of the Muselmann who has survived Auschwitz, suffered from shame, and become “the guard on the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends” (RA 69). As an eyewitness, the Muselmann thus bears an unassumable responsibility, a responsibility “that is infinitely greater than we could ever assume” (RA 21).

Agamben posits an ontological view of biopolitics and sovereignty when he situates biopolitics in a founding act of sovereign power since time immemorial: “the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (HS 6). Deviating from Foucault’s more Nietzschean/genealogical and non-ontological perspective on biopower, Agamben’s theorization of biopolitics, as Robert Sinnerbrink points out in his seminal essay “From Machenschaft to Biopolitics: A Genealogical Critique of Biopower,” “presents a more Heideggerian perspective in conceptualizing biopolitics as the metaphysical foundation of the history of Western political rationality commencing with the Greek division between zoe and bios” (240).

According to Sinnerbrink, although both Foucault and Agamben appropriate “the Heideggerian theme of a convergence between biological existence, technology, and socio-political power relations” (240), their paths diverge when they come to terms with life from drastically different angles.

4. Hardt and Negri: Biopolitical Production of the Body and Affect

In Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (2004), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri address the topic of biopolitics by distinguishing two different kinds of political practice. On the one hand, we have the “negative” biopower, which is a part of the war regime that “not only threatens us with death but also rules over life, producing and reproducing all aspects of society . . . it

6 In his article “From Machenschaft to Biopolitics: A Genealogical Critique of Biopower,” Robert Sinnerbrink employs a genealogical approach to critique the concepts of biopower and biopolitics in the work of Foucault and Agamben. His genealogy does not begin with Foucault but rather with Heidegger, and Sinnerbrink argues that the notion of the biopolitical can be found in Heidegger’s Nietzsche lectures of the 1930s and 40s and in his posthumously published Beiträge or Contributions to Philosophy.
stands above society, transcendent, as a sovereign authority and imposes its order” (Multitude 94). On the other hand, we have the “affirmative” biopolitical production which not only “engages social life in its entirety” like biopower, but also “is immanent to society and produces social relationships and forms of life-in-common through collaborative forms of labor” (Multitude 95).

The two writers favor “biopolitical production” as a mode of production in a democratic society, as a means to resist the encroachment of global capitalism, and as a sound social basis to initiate a project of the multitude. In their book Empire (2000), they critique Foucault for his evasion of historical materialism and his failure to grasp “the real dynamics of production in biopolitical society” (28). They also critique Deleuze and Guattari for their inability to articulate or to radicalize the ontology of social production and reproduction (Empire 28). Hardt and Negri’s stance is clear because they think that those who can better grasp and analyze the relationship between social production and biopower are a group of contemporary Italian Marxist authors who “recognize the biopolitical dimension in terms of the new nature of productive labor and its living development in society, using terms such as ‘mass intellectuality,’ ‘immaterial labor,’ and the Marxian concept of ‘general intellect’” (Empire 28-29). Nevertheless, Hardt and Negri don’t think these Italian Marxists’ all-too-intellectual tendency—“to treat the new laboring practices in biopolitical society only in their intellectual and incorporeal aspects”—has gone far enough. Hardt and Negri’s task is to bring the focus back to the biopolitical production of the corporeal, the somatic, and the affective by reexamining “the productivity of bodies and the value of affect” (Empire 30). The body is the thing because “it is life in the fullest sense and politics in the proper sense” (30). They say: “Our analysis has to descend into the jungle of productive and conflictual determinations that the collective biopolitical body offers us” (Empire 30).

5. Esposito: The Paradigm of Immunization

Roberto Esposito, while acknowledging Foucault’s extraordinary analytic power, critiques him for not being able to answer the following questions in a clear-cut fashion: “Why does a politics of life always risk being reversed into a work of death? . . . Does biopolitics precede, follow, or coincide temporally with modernity? Does it have a historical, epochal, or originary dimension?” (Bios 8). Most important of all, Esposito continues, Foucault “oscillates between a continuist attitude and another that is more inclined to mark differential thresholds” (Bios 9). Embedded in Foucault’s genealogy of biopolitics, then, is “an epistemological
uncertainty” (Bios 9). This problem of oscillation between two time frameworks can be attributed to his failure “to seek a more ductile paradigm,” one which Esposito would prefer to look at “in terms of immunization” (Bios 9).

Simply put, Esposito’s idea is that “immunization posits itself between biopolitics and modernity” (Bios 9). He maintains that the problematic of the paradigm of immunization “restores the missing link of Foucault’s argumentation . . . only when biopolitics is linked conceptually to the immunitary dynamic of the negative protection of life does biopolitics reveal its specifically modern genesis” (Bios 9). Thus in his book Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy, Esposito seeks to fill this gap and elaborates his point in the form of a question: “How and in what sense can immunization fill the semantic void, that interval of meaning which remains open in Foucault’s text between the constitutive poles of the concept of politics, namely, biology and politics?” (45).

We can see that basically what Esposito desires is to construct a critical perspective of his own, namely the paradigm of immunization, and yet without deviating too much from the interpretive path that Foucault has created and demonstrated—the Foucauldian genealogy of biopolitics. On the other hand, Esposito’s notions of affirmative biopolitics and the paradigm of immunization are deeply indebted to Nietzschean thoughts, especially Nietzsche’s notions of the will to power and the principle of preservation. Mediating between life and politics, these two contrasting notions of Nietzsche can be embodied by the perpetual strife between two modes of bio-political exercise, namely, between active and reactive forces, between risk and preservation, between the Dionysian and the Appolinian, and between affirmative biopolitics and the negative politics of immunity. Thus Esposito proposes using an affirmative politics of life to counteract the Nazi politics of death or of absolute control over life.

As it happens, Esposito’s notion of immunity also resonates with the Bataillean notion of the “restricted economy” which must govern its internal regulation in accordance with externally imposed conditions or restrictions. This calculated, measured expenditure of a restricted economy may be seen to resemble the spirit and central concern of “immunity.”

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7 Esposito has pointed out this dimension of Nietzsche’s thought: “a categorical as well as stylistic splitting occurs between two tonalities of thought juxtaposed and interwoven that constitutes the most typical cipher of the Nietzschean text: destined on the one side to anticipate, at least on the theoretical level, the destructive and self-destructive slippage of twentieth-century biocracy, and on the other the prefiguration of the lines of an affirmative biopolitics that has yet to come” (10).
II. Tracing Heterogeneous Pathways
and Reinventing Alternative Forms of Life:
Five Special Issue Articles

The intellectual debate across a wide range of fields concerning the issues of life over the last few decades has been multi-valent, multi-faceted, and increasingly heated. Oftentimes, these issues—biopower, biopolitics, bioethics, biocapital, bioscience, biomedicine, biotechnology, biodefense, bioterrorism, biogovernmentality, etc.—resonate with wider tension between the disciplinary society and the control society, between classical liberalism and neoliberalism, between episteme and techne, between epistemology and ontology, between fear and risk, between form-of-survival and form-of-life, between bare life and singular life, between the political and the economic, between surplus and lack, between credit and debt, between capitalism and (neo-)Marxism, between polis and oikonomia, between Homo sacer and Homo œconomicus, and so on and so forth. The tension or the dynamic is the underlying reason that the topic of life has generated contradictory emotions and positions between hopes and fears, between fascination and repulsion, and between celebration and condemnation, and has become the center of so much conflict and attention. As Melinda Cooper perceptively points out, “It is impossible to talk about biopolitics today without evoking a whole battle ground of theoretical positions and counterpositions” (5).

In order to make the contingencies and events of life thinkable, each of the five articles included in this special issue on “bios” takes issue with the recent debate about the politics of life by adopting a unique approach or perspective to address issues or read certain texts which are of special interest to each individual author. In all manner of their distinctive ways, each individual article is at once a story, a critique, and a record of events during a particular space-time frame. They showcase the range of paths already taken, altered, abandoned, or not yet taken but all the same their goal is to shed some light on the politics of life via an alternative pathway and to provoke further debates about bare life upon facing the remains of life and history. All five essays are informative, original, and provocative.

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Our first special issue article by Han-yu Huang, entitled “Risk, Fear and Immunity: Reinventing the Political in the Age of Biopolitics,” opens with a genesis
of the “monster” and addresses crucial issues in the current debates about biopolitics. Huang adopts a Žižekian-ethical-biopolitical stance and theoretical framework in order to map out an extensive genealogy of biopower in relation to risk society theory. In addition, while pointing out the pitfalls of biopolitics, especially the limits of Foucault’s and Agamben’s theories of biopolitics, in particular their potential negation of social ethics and individual autonomy, Huang uses Esposito’s affirmative biopolitics to justify what he calls the “negativity” inherent in our society.

By shifting the focus of biopolitical investigation from the question of immunitas, risk, and fear to that of the neighborly monster, Huang opens up the biopolitical more directly to questions of the Other. As he says, “Our reading of the monster and bodily horror, of their social, biopolitical implications should, therefore, take its ground in a more sophisticated conceptualization of the Other than the logic of imaginary projection and abjection.” For Huang, life in its particularities is always tempered by the Other, the monstrous, and the neighborly monster.

At the end of the essay, Huang highlights Slavoj Žižek’s psychoanalytic and ethical perspectives on the Other as a Neighborly-Thing, as a way to “reinvent” the political in the epoch of biopolitics. He privileges the Žižekian ethical subject because this subject is someone who through his “passive-aggressive” will is able to confront a radical uprootedness and can “fear fears and risk risks” rather than indulging itself in consumerism, the care of the self, the ethics of finitude or ethics of anti-violence. As a whole this essay, which displays Huang’s excellent grasp of the modern biopolitical turn, makes a valuable contribution to the current discourse of biopolitics and the theoretical debates arising from it.

Steven Shaviro’s article, “The ‘Bitter Necessity’ of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control,” has a clear thread of argument, a logical and succinct exposition, and a provocative thesis. Plunging into his discussion without further ado, Shaviro has shown us that even though Foucault and Deleuze may have seemed to move in different “directions”—Deleuze moves from the Foucauldian disciplinary society to the so-called “control society” (Negotiations 177), while Foucault moves from the “disciplinary society” to the “biopolitical society”—they both, in their later theories, came around to confront the economic factors in political life, and they both put a special emphasis on the question of debt. Shaviro writes: “Faced with the incipience of neoliberalism, both Deleuze and Foucault shift
their focus away from biopolitics, or the regulation of bodies and populations, and return to a kind of quasi-Marxist concern with political economy. Almost in spite of themselves, they both rediscover political economy at the heart of social processes that had previously seemed to be of an entirely different order.” Shaviro also points out that in The Birth of Biopolitics (2008), which features Foucault’s 1978-1979 lectures series at the College de France, Foucault deviates from the topic of biopolitics or the governmentality of bodies and populations that he proposes to address in his book title, and concentrates instead on discussing and exploring “neoliberalism,” the birth of a new figure of Homo œconomicus, and the emerging logic of “human capital” and its investment.

After a careful and thoughtful delineation of the development of Deleuze and Foucault’s thinking, Shaviro puts forth his thesis once again: “to summarize, both Foucault, in his analysis of neoliberalism, and Deleuze, in his analysis of the control society, insist upon what I can only call an economism at the heart of postmodernity.” Here he stresses that he uses the word economism “advisedly,” that it is an observation born out of thoughtful deliberation and not an unfounded speculation. In his essay, Shaviro presents a thought-provoking perspective on our current bio-socio-economic-political state of affairs.

Erik Bordeleau, in his article “What Remains of Tiananmen?: Postpolitical Reduction to Bare Life in Emily Tang’s Conjugation,” examines the postpolitical life that lingers after the Tiananmen Square events portrayed in Emily Tang’s first feature film Conjugation (2001). He scrutinizes the remains of Tiananmen—the events and scenes representative of the post-Tiananmen situation—under the lens of bare life, showing how the remaining life is affected by the politics of death or thanatopolitics. Bordeleau presents an original analysis of the movie by illustrating how it captures a “temps mort,” at once “a time no verb can be conjugated with” and a post-political time in which young socialist revolutionaries have to give up their ideals and take refuge in a precarious bare life.

Although (and also because) the Tiananmen incident and its aftermath is still a taboo topic in China, where discussions of it may be subjected to severe censorship, Bordeleau’s paper makes a significant contribution to studies of 1989 uprising-and-massacre and its aftermath. It keenly observes the historical-social-political-economic-human conditions of the time via Agamben’s biopolitical theories and Ackbar Abbas’s concept of decadence, and sets the
post-Tiananmen malaise against the more general background of neoliberal globalization. “More precisely,” elaborates Bordeleau, “I would like to show how the existential itinerary depicted in Conjugation can be read as a powerful allegory about how neoliberalism operates as a reduction of the political to a postpolitical, economic management issue.” Bordeleau sees the film Conjugation as a “paradigmatic cinematic itinerary” which illustrates the complex passage from a “qualified form-of-life” to a “form of survival” or “bare life” in China, and can be situated in a larger context of “the ongoing global oikonomic mobilization.”

With her title “Conjugation” Tang is of course playing on at least two meanings of the noun: the conjugation of verbs (into different tenses) and the conjugation (unity) of a husband and wife, or of a people. Thus Bordeleau’s insight that Tang is taking the incident as a “temps mort” is especially perceptive, as is his comparison of this “time” with that of France’s 200th anniversary of the French Revolution in 1989 (the year of Tiananmen): he sees a “conjugation” of the status of human rights and of democracy in France at a time when the political situation was also changing and progressing.

Andrea Bachner’s article examines the remains of history and offers us an insightful reading of the role of trauma in Gao Xingjing’s Soul Mountain and Wuhe’s The Remains of Life. Bachner uses the key term “history” and other related notions such as trauma, testimony, prehistory, cryptohistory, bio-graphesis and thanato-graphesis, to bring these two works together. By presenting an engaging dialogue between the two literary works and history itself, Bachner speaks of “the remains of history” as a haunting and traumatic reminder of history, that is, of what has passed (has become the past). She argues that even though both works “challenge concepts of history, trauma, and witnessing,” their solutions—a cryptohistory by Gao and a return to life’s ineffable power by Wuhe—are still parasitic upon history.

Bachner’ reading of Soul Mountain as cryptohistory is especially provocative. “In Soul Mountain,” explains Bachner, “Gao Xingjian formulates a history beyond signification, as cryptohistory. His text puts up a resistance to meaning, negating history as a structure conducive to deciphering. As cryptohistory, an alternative type of testimony, in the form of the individual’s interpretation of history, is necessary.” But the historical pattern offered by Wuhe’s The Remains of Life is quite different. Wuhe tries “to reach beyond signification in his sketching of a history beyond
thanatopolitics,” and his purpose is “to rewrite witnessing in the present as bearing testimony to survival itself.” Bachner’s original interpretations, grounded in perspicuous close reading of the texts, are very illuminating.

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In “The Horror of Dasein: Reading Steele’s ‘The Days Between’,” Chia Yi Lee adopts a Heideggerian approach to interpret Allen Steele’s story “The Days Between,” which is actually the second Chapter of his Coyote: A Novel of Interstellar Exploration. However, Lee’s interpretation of the story is not just a “Heideggerian reading” pure and simple because, as he emphasizes, “the story in fact conjures up a state of existence that is not yet touched by, that cannot yet be accounted for by the Heideggerian analytic.” The key point is that Heidegger could not have quite imagined a “world” (Welt) or “life-world” (Lebenswelt) like the one in which the protagonist Gillis finds himself trapped in “The Days Between.” He is virtually alone (as all other members of the crew are in a deathlike state of suspended animation, Gillis has awakened prematurely) for many years on a spaceship already far from earth and speeding toward a distant planet; after essentially living out his life writing a fantasy novel, Gillis dies in an absurd, random falling accident, many years before the ship reaches its destination. Lee suggests that Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-world cannot really fit here, that Gillis is already dealing with a Not-being-in-a-world, in part because there is no “They,” no human others in this world; the sort of Angst (the horror or dread arising from our sense of radical finitude and non-being) that Gillis experiences is also somehow different: it is in fact the “horror of no being-in all the time.”

Lee’s interpretation allows us to achieve a deeper understanding of Steele’s story via Heidegger while simultaneously offering us an alternative insight into Heidegger’s thinking via the story. “The point is,” Lee maintains, “that the story opens for us a way through which we might, not critique Heidegger’s system of thought but ‘read differently’ his concern with being-in-the-world.” Lee observes that this sort of (more less totally technologized) non-world Gillis is in, the sort of Angst he experiences—the awareness of not-being-in-a-world, of no being-in all the time—is something that science fiction (something not really considered by Heidegger) has a unique capacity to evoke. Lee ends his essay with a discussion of two of Heidegger’s essays on (or partly on) technology—“The Question of Technology” and “Being, Dwelling, Thinking”—in which Heidegger gives a certain priority to (an original and in some sense universal and unifying) Being over beings.
Su / Coming to “Terms” 23

(things), and to a sense of “home” that beings (including human beings) are in some way (increasingly) detached from in our ever-technologizing world. Gillis’ situation of being “far from home” (in various senses) may seem to parallel that of our own situation, our own world, and/or the one we are speeding into . . . depending perhaps upon the degree to which we envision this as a “posthuman” world.

But again there is the other side here: to the extent that we are already post-human, and/or (post-)bio-political, etc., the marginal or even margin-of-a-margin genre of science fiction becomes increasingly our own genre, its voice our own voice, its ek-static (standing-outside-itself) power of pure freedom and/or imagination our own power. Thus the article has a special, more “personal” and “subjective” (or indeed more “existential”) relevance to our special issue topic of “bios,” “life.” Do “bios” and the “bio-political” (like conceptions of the non-human and post-human) imply bodies more than minds/souls/selves subjectivities? And, if so, might they also imply a not-being-in-the world (or not-being-“at-home”), a “no being-in all the time”? (Or do “life” and even “body” already imply some sort of “being-in”?) And what sort of Angst—or absence of all Angst—would we now be talking about?

III. Conjuring Up the Hauntology of Life

O horrible! O horrible! Most horrible!

. . . .

Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.

—The Ghost, Hamlet 1.5.80 & 91

Repetition and first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. What is a ghost? What is the effectivity or the presence of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there there, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition and first time, but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time makes of it also a last time. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a hauntology.

—Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx 10

The issue of “life” itself is a large, loose, baggy monster. Any introduction,
like this one here, is not going to cover or remember everything. And yet, it is impossible for us to walk away from life just like that, for life’s Furies, the angry and fearful ones, are going to hunt us down and force us to remember those haunting scenes that we desire to forget or repress. When we come to terms with the question of life, we are always haunted by what we term the “hauntology of life,” the haunting sens/scène (meaning/scene) of life which offers us an alternative way to look at life and to understand the life of the species from an irreducible, uncanny, spectral, other-worldly perspective.

Coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 work *Specters of Marx,* “hauntology” is a typical portmanteau word which combines the sounds and meanings of “haunt” and “ology.” In terms of its sound, hauntology is a homophone seemingly bearing the same sound as “ontology” in French. In terms of its meaning, hauntology is a study of the ghost, the phantom, the specter, the spirit, the esprit, the Gespenst, the Geist, the revenant or the will to power which/who keeps coming back in-between times (in between-times), visit upon visit, return upon return, haunting without end. Figuring itself as an art of disguise, hauntology, “epiphanizing” itself in the homophone/form of ontology, is exactly the haunting mimicry of ontology.

Hauntology confounds ontology, the discourse on the Being of beings or about the essence of life or death, and unsettles all Heideggerian “grounding” efforts. It concerns the unpresentable, unrepresentable, unforeseeable, unnamable, and impossible. Hauntology, being the uncanny double of ontology, is thus the surplus of knowledge which cannot be translated into the realm of epistemology. The role of hauntology, as the thinking of phantasmagoria, simulacra, and singularity, is to haunt and shadow the Being of beings and to remind us that the most fundamental element of experience has always aligned itself to the coming of the specter/spirit-Other. In the end, hauntology intertwines itself with ontology and together they form the genetic pattern of an inter-linking double gyre, constantly transforming and transvaluating each other without end.

Hauntology confounds homtology, a study of homeliness and secretiveness (heimlich), with its unhomeliness and uncanniness (unheimlich). Hauntology’s uncanny homeliness, namely its absent presence, follows nothing but traces of presence, always untimely. No longer do we concern ourselves only with the Heideggerian issue of Dasein, for the specter has no Dasein. Instead, we want to focus on the study of the paradoxical state—which is neither being nor non-being, neither presence nor absence—of the specter, the homo sacer, the “no being-in,” as well as explore the threshold or the liminality of life, which is characterized by

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8 This explanation of the word “hauntology” is based on the entry for it in Wikipedia.
openness, ambiguity and indeterminacy, between hauntology and ontology, between non-being and being, between death and life. We want to study the “epiphany” of a specter, or a spirit, or the spirit of a time (zeitgeist).

For our purpose here, we want to stress that the Derridean hauntology—which derives its meaning from Karl Marx’s assertion in the Manifesto of the Communist Party: “A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism”—can be the prototype of our hauntology of life. By means of the specters of Marx, Derrida is profressing a political economy of specters, or a spectro-econo-politics. Derrida reminds us that in order to exorcise the specters of communism that haunted Europe, wars and events of great violence were incurred in the 20th century from both the extreme left and extreme right. Charnel houses were built and concentration camps such as Auschwitz were constructed.

For our purpose here, we want to ask what is the specter that is haunting the globe? To what degree and in what sense is Marx’s theory of surplus, debt, labor, production, and capital, or any of his specters, still relevant to our understanding of neoliberalism, biopolitics, globalization, biotechnology, and biocapital today? Above all, we will pay special attention to the specters of neoliberalism, of capitalism, of immunity, of the welfare state, of the social security system. In addition, the questions that our hauntology of life most cares about are as follows: Who are the forerunners of the topic, the topos or topoi of life and biopolitics? What are the specters of Marx, of Nietzsche, of Foucault, of Derrida, of Benjamin, of Heidegger, of Agamben? What is the life/bare life/non-life of a ghostly apparition, phantom, doppelganger, revenant, remnant, or homo sacer? What is the thing that keeps haunting or disturbing our life? What is the time of a specter?

The hauntology of life would like especially to conjure up the specters of our afore-mentioned “ghostly fathers,” not only to invite them to tell their tales and have their say but also to confide to them our innermost thoughts. Meanwhile, we also want to cross-examine their testimony or argument by emulating what Hamlet has done in questioning and verifying the words of his Father’s Ghost. Moreover, hauntology comes to terms with life always from “the other end,” the end of life, the end of Man, the end of history, the end of the subject, the end of philosophy, and the end of time. It takes an interest in the question of the “post-,” the post-life, the post-human, the post-Auschwitz, the post-traumatic experience, so long as these

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9 In Hamlet, Hamlet’s slain father, who was the king, of course appears to inform Hamlet that Claudius, now king, had killed him and to urge his son to get revenge. In Romeo and Juliet, Romeo calls Friar Lawrence his “ghostly father” (2.3.41). In the Roman Catholic church, a ghostly father is a confessor—a priest who listens to confessions.
post-states of being/nonbeing do not run on a chronological timeline but instead on a spectral time, a kairological time, a time at large, a Benjaminian weak-messianic “now time” (Jetztzeit) (“On the Concept of History” 395), a Blanchotian “outside of time in time,” a Derridean “messianic without messianism” haunting time, an Agambenian “remaining time” (RA 159) or “absolute imminence” (RA 128), a Hamletian out-of-joint time, or a Nietzschean “untimely” time. Disrupting linear time, such a spectral temporality would be based not on sequentiality and chronology but rather on the haunting moment, the kairos which overtakes us by surprise, the messianic imminence, and by a complex and dynamic interweaving of past and present in the now-time which keeps this messianic moment open to all kinds of possibilities and responsibilities.

In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, Walter Benjamin writes about the secret pact between past generations and the present one, and discusses the question of inheritance and the “weak messianic power” bequeathed to the present generation: “There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply” (254). The messianic “overtakes” us in the messianic “moment,”

10 Maurice Blanchot offers us a special concept of time in The Step Not Beyond, “Time, time: the step not beyond that is not accomplished in time would lead outside of time, without this outside being intemporal, but there where time would fall, fragile fall, according to this “outside of time in time” towards which writing would attract us, were we allowed, having disappeared from ourselves, to write within the secret of the ancient fear” (1).

11 Derrida defines his haunting time as follows: “haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar. Untimely, it does not come to, it does not happen to, it does not befall . . . ” (SM 4).

12 For Agamben, “The messianic Kingdom is neither the future (the millennium) nor the past (the golden age): it is, instead, a remaining time” (RA 159). Advancing Heidegger’s phenomenology and the notion of “authentic temporality,” Agamben contends that “Auschwitz marks the irrecoverable crisis of authentic temporality, of the very possibility of ‘deciding’ on the disjunction. The camp, the absolute situation, is the end of every possibility of an originary temporality, that is, of the temporal foundation of a singular positioning space, of a Da. In the camp, the irreparability of the past takes the form of an absolute imminence” (RA 128).

13 In his “Preface” to Difference & Repetition, Deleuze comments on overcoming the binary notion of time and elaborates on Nietzsche’s notion of time: “Following Nietzsche we discover, as more profound than time and eternity, the untimely: philosophy is neither a philosophy of history, nor a philosophy of the eternal, but untimely, always and only untimely—that is to say, ‘acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come’” (xxi).
Benjamin elaborates, in a transforming “surprise” that seizes us here and now—in the “present, as the ‘time of the now’” (263). Derrida picks up Benjamin’s notion of “weak messianic power” and reinvents it as “the messianic without messianism” in his *Specters of Marx*. In the meantime, he also stresses that the responsibility of the present generation as the inheritor who has been “given” this “weak messianic power” cannot be taken lightly. This bequeathed gift of the *weak* messianic power, this “inheritance” as Derrida prefers to call it, “must be reaffirmed by transforming it as radically as will be necessary. . . . Inheritance is never a *given*, it is always a task” (*SM* 54).14 It obliges us to re-evaluate all values and all kinds of bio-political-socio-economic relations.

The hauntology of life shows exactly life’s resistance to history, to chronos, to full revelation, to interpretation, and to the whole meaning-making business. It concerns not only the ghostly and monstrous side of life, the invisible hand of the market, the specters/spirits of our forefathers, and our responsibility to them but also the cryptohistory which is at once a history beyond signification and an alternative type of testimony, especially the testimony which contains the haunting trauma that cannot be fully revealed. Meant to be an alternative study of life, the hauntology of life keeps alive not only life’s alterity but also its creative and interpretive potential. It believes that “life is but a walking shadow”15 and that the mirror image of life is not death but the specter or the doppelgänger of life.

What we need nowadays is a séance and by no means an exorcism or a paradigm of immunity. We have to commit ourselves to the work of *calling*, of conjuration and active remembering, remembering those specters/spirits who came before us and inviting them to come again, to start their “life” anew by coming back—the revenants of our forefathers, the remnants of Auschwitz or any other concentration camps, and the revenants of the past generations—without assimilating their alterity into the present and selfsame, for those who are yet to come, the arrivants.

1. Beware of the Specters of Marx: Neoliberalism and the Spectropolitics of Life

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14 For further discussion of Derrida’s appropriation of Benjamin in *Specters of Marx*, please see Jill Petersen Adams’s essay, “Mourning, The Messianic, and The Specter: Derrida’s Appropriation of Benjamin in *Specters of Marx,*” which addresses the question of Derrida’s appropriation of Benjamin’s “weak messianic power” in his notion of “the messianic without messianism,” and explores especially “mourning’s pivotal role in Derrida’s critical adoption of Benjamin” (140).

15 From Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* 5.5.24.
At a time when a new world disorder is attempting to install its neo-capitalism and neo-liberalism, no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx’s ghosts. . . . Whether they wish it or know it or not, all men and women, all over the earth, are today to a certain extent the heirs of Marx and Marxism.

—Jacques Derrida

*Specters of Marx* 37 & 91

Steven Shaviro, in his “Bitter Necessity of Debt,” points out that both Deleuze and Foucault move away from biopolitics and “return to a kind of quasi-Marxist concern with political economy.” “Their work opened up other ways,” argues Shaviro, “more indebted to Nietzsche than to Marx, of considering power, desire, and the social. And yet, when Deleuze and Foucault contemplate the futurity now knocking at our door, they both rediscover the force of the economic as if it were now returning with a vengeance.” When neoliberalism came on the scene in the second half of the twentieth century, it effected, as Foucault warns us in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, “an inversion of the relationships of the social to the economic” (240) and constructed a new figure of *Homo œconomicus*. As for Deleuze, he points out that in the control society “a man is no longer a man confined but a man in debt” (*Negotiations* 181). Both Foucault and Deleuze call our attention to the vital role of political economism, a specter of Marx that is actively at play in our social life.

Derrida also takes notice of this neoliberal messianism and cries out in alarm in a timely fashion in *Specters of Marx* that now is “a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelise in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity” (85). He urges us not to be blinded by this neo-evangelism, not to be overwhelmed by the ecstatic celebration due to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in 1989, but to confront human suffering face to face in a more urgent and serious manner:

Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of celebrating the “end of ideologies” and the end of the great emancipatory discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of innumerable singular sites of suffering:
no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, have so many men, women and children been subjugated, starved or exterminated on the earth. (SM 85)

One of the characteristics of capitalism and neoliberalism alike is their tendency to create an excess of promise, a capitalist messianism, and an excess of spending and debt. On the other hand, neo-liberal capitalism has invested all of its capital in all sorts of biotechnology whose aim is to incur wars and to control bodies, sexuality, health, reproduction, medical care, the affect industry, and the production of knowledge in general.

As a state of global financial crisis and emergency understood as self-propagating event rather than as sovereignty’s constitutive dispositif, the financial tsunami of 2008 has exposed the fact that there is a hidden danger and risk embedded in the core, in the operative logic of neoliberalism. Or we can say that the exercise of neoliberalism can give rise to an unforeseeable nuclear chain reaction or a domino-effect-prone financial crisis in a totally new way. Its operation is neither “the state of immunity” as Esposito has claimed nor “the state of exception” as Agamben has pointed out, for this crisis did not presuppose any exercise of sovereign power. Both Esposito and Agamben failed to identify this kind of neoliberal event because of the limited application of their theories.

Derrida argues in Specters of Marx that the spirits of Marx or Marxism are even more relevant to us after all kinds of events in 1989—the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the crackdown in Tiananmen Square. Indeed, now is the time for us to re-evaluate the value of Marxism and to reckon with this “quasi-Marxist concern” embedded in Deleuze and Foucault’s discourses. To a certain degree, we can say that this “quasi-Marxist concern” is in fact one of “the specters of Marx,” who of course insisted on the determining significance of economic forces in human life. According to Marx, life depended on nature, but through definite social relations and economic praxes. Marxist ideas became the backbone of Homo economicus and were subsumed within a materialism, one through which life was constructed by the market value and the material forces of production. In the third volume of Capital, Marx develops an in-depth analysis of surplus value. By identifying the structural relationship between wages, labor, commodity production, and the extraction of surplus value, Marx has noted the irresolvable tension between labor and capital. The history of capitalism thus is full of attempts to mediate between the reproduction of capital and the reproduction of human life under the restraints of some form of sovereign
power. Marx uses the notion of surplus value to critique the capitalist political economy of his time: “Surplus value and the rate of surplus-value are . . . the invisible essence to be investigated, whereas the rate of profit and hence the form of surplus-value as profit are visible surface phenomena” (134).

For Derrida, Marxism is a yet unfulfilled “messianic promise” (SM 91) and “whether we like it or not, whatever consciousness we have of it, we cannot not be its heirs” (SM 91). Marx, above all, is a great thinker along with Nietzsche, Darwin, and Freud. Derrida, in The Specters of Marx, exerts all his might to reclaim Marx as a great philosopher, for he “doesn’t belong to the communists, to the Marxists, to the parties” only but “ought to figure within our great canon of Western political philosophy” (SM 32). Marx’s political economy is a messianic spectropolitics. This is not only because the motif of spirit and specter is prevalent in his texts, but also because his concerns will continue to haunt us by offering us “a certain experience of emancipatory promise” (SM 59) and “a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism, an idea of justice—which we distinguish from law or right and even from human rights—and an idea of democracy—which we distinguish from its current concept and from its determined predicates today” (SM 59)—for the future still to come. We have to note here that Derrida’s Marx is the Marxian without Marxism which dissociates itself with the so-called “philosophical messianism,” the teleologies and eschatologies of Hegel and Heidegger.

According to Derrida, “The specter that Marx was talking about then, communism, was there without being there. It was not yet there. It will never be there” (SM 100). In very much the same manner, the specters of Marx, along with their messianic promise, are like the Godot in Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, who was a no show yesterday, couldn’t make it today, and always is to come tomorrow.16 Marx’s messianic spectropolitics is like a floating signifier without referents, and refers to a state of being that doesn’t point to any actual reality or agreed-upon meaning. Moreover, the spirit of Marx, which is that of a will to justice, democracy and the equal distribution of wealth, was and is the talk of the town, existing in people’s dreams and in their minds, and continuing to call people to arms.

16 The typical dialogue between Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) goes like this: “Estragon: He should be here./Vladimir: He didn’t say for sure he’d come./Estragon: And if he doesn’t come?/Vladimir: We’ll come back to-morrow./Estragon: And then the day after to-morrow./Vladimir: Possibly./Estragon: And so on./Vladimir: The point is—/Estragon: Until he comes./Vladimir: You’re merciless” (10-11).
2. Speaking of the Devil and the Muselmann: Overcoming the Ethics of Ressentiment in Nietzsche and Agamben

For every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent; still more specifically, a guilty agent who is susceptible to suffering—in short, some living thing upon which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affects, actually or in effigy: for the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of the suffering to win relief, anaesthesia—the narcotic he cannot help desiring to deaden pain of any kind. This alone, I surmise, constitutes the actual physiological cause of ressentiment, vengefulness, and the like: a desire to deaden pain by means of affects.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

On the Genealogy of Morals, III, §15: 127

By the term ressentiment, Nietzsche designated a physiological-psychological disposition motivated by feelings of suffering, trauma, sickness, weakness; a bad conscience, urged by a desire to find a guilty one on which to vent one’s anger, or spurred by a self-deceptive lust for revenge and therefore a lust to ease or deaden one’s pain. Ressentiment is essentially reactive, and Nietzsche suggests that Christian morality is inherently structured as a form of slave morality. Slave morality, like any ascetic ideal, depends on a fundamental disposition of ressentiment toward the masters, the exploitation of the sense of guilt, and a need to locate the cause of one’s suffering in order to vent one’s affects. Unable to trust himself or find strength in himself, the slave or the sufferer is either good at producing “orgies of feeling” (GM, Essay III, §20: 139) to justify his suffering or overwhelmed by “a desire to deaden pain by means of affects” (GM, Essay III, §15: 127). Here Nietzsche says that “they scour the entrails of their past and present, for obscure and questionable occurrences that offer them the opportunity to revel in tormenting suspicions and to intoxicate themselves with the poison of their own malice” (GM, Essay III, §15: 127). In the end they direct their suffering and bad or guilty conscience not only at others but also at themselves, accounting for their present suffering by seeking it in themselves, “in some guilt, in a piece of the past” and by understanding their own suffering “as a punishment” (GM, Essay III, §20: 140).
For Agamben, Nietzsche is a pioneer and champion of modern ethics. His overcoming of *ressentiment* marks the beginning of the ethics of the twentieth century (*RA* 99). Nevertheless, Agamben thinks that the Nietzschean ethics has its defects, its limits, that his attempt to overcome *ressentiment* unfortunately meets its limit at Auschwitz precisely because the latter “marks a decisive rupture” (*RA* 99) in human history. He retells a demonic story told by Nietzsche:

Let us imagine repeating the experiment that Nietzsche, under the heading “The Heaviest Weight,” proposes in *The Gay Science*. “One day or one night,” a demon glides beside a survivor and asks: “Do you want Auschwitz to return again and to return again and again, innumerable times, do you want every instant, every single detail of the camp to repeat itself for eternity, returning eternally in all the same precise sequence in which they took place? Do you want this to happen again, again and again for eternity?” (*RA* 99)

To make the comparison easier, here is the famous passage from *The Gay Science* in which Nietzsche presents the first of three versions of his “thought of the eternal return,” the “ethical” version, in which we are exhorted to joyously affirm our life (*amor fati*, love of fate) in all its immanence and finitude:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust! Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon
your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (GS, §341, "The Greatest Weight": 273-74)

In his note to §341, “The Greatest Weight” in The Gay Science, Walter Kaufman informs us that Nietzsche himself in Ecce Homo considered Aphorism 341 the first proclamation of “the basic idea of Zarathustra” (BWN 752), namely the idea of the eternal return (273). However, Agamben thinks that his retelling of the story does prove a point, that is, Nietzsche’s vision of the eternal return simply does not work because when encountering a human disaster, a human suffering of this scale, no one would like to experience the eternal nightmare of Auschwitz again and again. Thus Agamben concludes with a firm voice that we definitely don’t want to take this devil’s words and his offer into account: “this simple reformulation of Nietzsche’s experiment suffices to refute it beyond all doubt, excluding the possibility of its own being proposed” (RA 99). Now the question is whether the demon in Agamben’s account is anything like the demon in Nietzsche’s story because they pose drastically different questions and present totally different human conditions. Leland de la Durantaye, in his Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction, lashes out at Agamben’s critique of Nietzsche. He thinks that Agamben’s reformulation is either “a vulgarized version of Nietzsche’s doctrine” (273) or a completely different idea. “Nietzsche’s remarks were not meant as a justification of the past,” De la Durantaye contends, “not as something of the nature of Hegel’s epochal ‘what is reasonable.’ The point of Nietzsche’s arduous thought experiment was to place responsibility for human affairs, actions, and values in this world rather than in some transcendental otherworld or afterlife. Its goal was precisely to confront the horrors of the past, not only the incidental oppositions to our whims and wills, not only disappointment, but injustice on the largest scale” (273).

The very purpose of the hauntology of life is to engage in active dialogues with the devil or the specter in Nietzsche, Agamben, and many others. For the time being, we need to summon the two demons mentioned above—the Nietzschean demon who challenges us to think about the eternal return of the same and the Agambenian demon who dares us, dares our nerves to experience the life of the camp again and again—and the two authors of these thought experiments, Nietzsche and Agamben, in order to cross examine them about the intention and also the hidden suppositions of their questions as well as their agenda as a whole.
For Nietzsche, to crave or to embrace life against all odds is much more important than to simply endure or to “live through” it. The ultimate and eternal “confirmation and seal” is but a gesture which reveals his thesis of the unyielding commitment to life, regardless of what kind of life it is in any given case. In other words, to accept the past as one’s fate (with no regret, no resentment) and to embrace one’s life fully are Nietzsche’s strategies for overcoming the ethics of ressentiment.

In his rendering, Agamben introduces a new demon who is not interested in the quotidian life or life in the general sense with all its joys and sorrows, ups and downs, but cares only about the extreme cases of life like that of Auschwitz. The person this demon addresses is not an “everyman” as in Nietzsche but a “survivor” who has suffered all the torments of the camp and just barely manages to survive. It is fair to say that Agamben’s “reformulation” and critique of Nietzsche is not quite to the point and thus unfair. We want to question the intention of the Agambenian demon and Agamben as well. We want to ask: “Will the demon intimidate and thus punish the survivor of the camps by asking Nietzsche’s demon-questions in such a way? And by doing so putting the survivor to shame and making him feel ashamed and guilty? It is quite likely that the way the questions are asked might arouse negative affects such as fear and resentment, and plant a seed of hate and vengeance in the mind of the survivor. It is clear that Agamben’s purpose is to orient the direction of the whole thought experiment toward his concern with the Holocaust and the death camps, as exemplified by Auschwitz, and toward other related issues such as the question of trauma, the way of coping with the traumatic, haunting past, the state of the remnant, the revenant, and the desubjectification of testimony.

When the survivors of Auschwitz deliver their testimonies and bear witness to the horrors of the Holocaust, who are they? Agamben in Remnants of Auschwitz undertakes an extended discussion of poetic creation and desubjectivity by drawing on the examples of Keats, Dante, Pessoa, and several others. Summing up his observations on the act of poetic creation, Agamben remarks that “every act of speech implies something like a desubjectification” (RA 113). By saying so, Agamben generalizes this desubjectified phenomenon of poetic “divine inspiration” and applies it to every act of speech. He then connects this phenomenon to the question: “Who is the subject of testimony?” (RA 120) in the context of Auschwitz, and proposes to “reread the phenomenology of testimony” (RA 120).

What remains of Auschwitz, therefore, is a past that is not past but keeps coming back as a haunting present. What remains of Auschwitz is a testimony that
is not a “subjectified” testimony but the haunting Voice that speaks. For Agamben, a witness is a *Muselmann* who has survived the ordeal of humiliation and starvation, the inhuman bare life, and managed to stay alive to bear witness to the Holocaust. What remains of Auschwitz, then, is a witness as *Muselmann* whose testimony bears witness to the fact that “it is not truly possible to destroy the human, that something always remains. The witness is this remnant” (*RA* 133-34).

The notion of “the remnant” appears in Agamben’s two books: *The Remnants of Auschwitz* (1998) and *The Time That Remains* (2000). What remains of Auschwitz is the remnant, rather than being what has remained in its literal sense of being the remainder, the left-over from some larger whole. The notion of the remnant takes on a wider, messianic sense. As Agamben defines it, the remnant is a “theologico-messianic concept” (*RA* 162). Reacting against the totalizing nature of Hegelian dialectical thinking, of the Spirit (*Geist*, “ghost” in English), the remnant, as the singular and irreducible part of a community, testifies to an entire event like Auschwitz and to the fact that it is impossible for history to eliminate differences and to anticipate the community to come. The remnant “allows for a new perspective that dislodges our acquainted notions of a people and a democracy, however impossible it may be to completely renounce them” (*TTR* 57). Agamben further elaborates: “This remnant is the figure, or the substantiability assumed by a people in a decisive moment and as such is the only real political subject” (*TTR* 57).

Through the exploration of the inhuman, the remnants of Auschwitz, we gradually come to grasp what it means to be human. At once a human being and something inhuman, one who is truly human and without humanity, a witness as *Muselmann* is the towering example in Agamben of one who overcomes the ethics of *ressentiment* and becomes the very object (or rather subject) of our hauntology of life—but is this *bios*, or is this not rather *zoe* (bare life) that we are speaking of now?—which purports to study the non-essential potentiality of the human being, look at life’s ethical complexity, and strive to develop a new ethics of life.18

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17 “Yet here the value of testimony,” Agamben explains, “lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority. The “true” witnesses, the “complete witnesses,” are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness” (*RA* 34). In other places Agamben writes, “Testimony takes place in the non-place of articulation. In the non-place of the Voice stands not writing but the witness” (*RA* 130). Testimony is, he continues, “something that cannot be assigned to a subject but that nevertheless constitutes the subject’s only dwelling place, its only possible consistency” (*RA* 130).

18 As Agamben writes in *Remnants of Auschwitz*: “The human being is the inhuman; the one whose humanity is completely destroyed is the one who is truly human. . . . There is no human essence; the human being is a potential being” (133).
Epilogue

The Exuberant Necessity of Debt & The Call to Responsibility

Let us consider first the radical and necessary heterogeneity of an inheritance. . . . An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the injunction to reaffirm by choosing. “One must” means one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret. If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as a cause—natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret—which says “read me, will you ever be able to do so? . . . There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility. An inheritance is always the reaffirmation of a debt. . . .

—Jacques Derrida

*Specters of Marx* 16, 91-92

The question of the politics of life is precisely the question of the birth and formation of biopolitics, and the question of understanding how we become what we are and how the world is made up, and the question of figuring out “the radical and necessary heterogeneity of an inheritance” (*SM* 16), as Derrida puts it. This is why life discourses, ancient and modern, are entirely political, social, historical, economic, and entirely human, all-too-human, beyond human, post-human and non-human, and entirely interpretable and beyond interpretation.

Many attempts have been made in recent years to come to terms with life. Our pivotal figure here is Foucault. Ever since “life’s” debut in history and Foucault’s ushering in of the thesis that the birth of biopolitics marks the threshold of modernity, the entire framework of bio-political discourse has been drastically and profoundly modified. The primal significance of the notion of biopolitics is obviously its great relevance to our modern and postmodern life. By placing his earlier analyses of disciplinary power in a new context, Foucault’s concept of biopolitics allows him to develop a “genealogy” of political power. Many of our
concerns about biopolitics nowadays are the resounding echoes of Foucault’s provocative proclamation of it.

Developing his narrative by analyzing history, from the reign of sovereign power to the growing concern with biopolitics, biotechnology, governmentality, and neoliberalism, Foucault’s genealogy of the biopolitical is a fascinating story of life, the body, sexuality, capitalism, individuality and the state in modern times, making the politics of life a lively field of inquiry and a sign or signature of our time.

Coinciding with this genealogy of biopolitics is something like a void in the kernel of modern thought—the “threshold of the void” left by man’s disappearance and philosophy’s death. Across this threshold of the void we move, either to enter or depart, taking an uncertain and ambiguous step, a Blanchotian “step/not beyond” (le pas au-delà), a step leading toward transcendence and immanence, prohibition and transgression simultaneously. This step into the void is always a game of dice and a play of limits. In this void harbors the Nietzschean eternal return “as both promise and task”—which is “nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think” (Foucault, OT 342).

Foucault’s genealogy of biopolitics is indebted to Nietzsche first and foremost, but also to Heidegger, Marx, Kant, and many others as well. In turn, Agamben, Hardt & Negri, and Esposito all owe a debt to Foucault (as well as to many others). It is the mission of the hauntology of life to trace and write a genealogy of the specters, those specters who have contributed to this “intellectual conjuncture” of the years leading up to the current biopolitical-discursive industry in all its aspects. These are years marked by the publication of Marx’s Das Capital and Nietzsche’s Die fröhliche Wissenschaft (The Gay Science, or Joyful Wisdom), Max Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,19 Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit (Being and Time), Derrida’s Spectres de Marx, Foucault’s Birth of Biopolitics, Agamben’s Homo Sacer, Benjamin’s Illuminations, Hardt & Negri’s Empire, Esposito’s Bios, to name but a few, as well as by the rise of neoliberal discourse. When we try to come to terms with life, we cannot but assume this inheritance. We turn to these specters of the past out of a concern for the future. And most important of all, as Derrida reminds us, this inheritance, to quote him again, “must be reaffirmed by transforming it as radically as will be necessary...Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task” (SM 54).

How to be a responsible heir is always an ethical question, for one needs to be

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19 Max Weber famously analyzes the spectro-political affinities between the rise of the Protestant faith and the beginning of modern capitalism in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.
an inventor in order to be an inheritor. Our interpretive act is derived not just from our responsibility but also from our irresponsibility, in the sense that to re-invent something means we are outside the limits of what our “responsibility” might be taken to prescribe or dictate. It is anything but ethical if one simply follows suit or takes for granted his/her responsibility as heir. To interpret, to re-interpret, and to interpret otherwise is our responsibility to the specters of Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault et al, to whom (as well as to many others) we are always in debt, indebted. The move to displace and transform the specters, to re-evaluate their values, is what makes us responsible heirs. The ability to undertake this task with a sense of mission and to see things in a new light is what enables the inheritor to step upon, step across a liminal threshold, where he/she can make a secret pact and establish a sacred communion with the specters of the past.

To be sure, we are the heirs of biopolitical discourses and never for a moment can we rid ourselves of this debt, this task, and this responsibility “to think” the idea of biopolitical justice in this void in the now time, in this Blanchotian “outside of time in time” (1). At this point, we come to realize that our genealogy of biopolitics is nothing but a genealogy of debt, indebtedness, and debt relations. It is an all-too-human debt, irreducible and with no escape. To be in debt to our ghostly fathers is to be indebted to their contributions and to be heirs of their heritage. Assuming the role of an heir is to assume the heir’s responsibility, that is, to build a “community” which is “already given, here and now” (Esposito, Communitas 18).

Community, as defined by Esposito in his Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community, “isn’t a property, nor is it a territory to be separated and defended against those who do not belong to it. Rather, it is a void, a debt, a gift to the other that also reminds us of our constitutive alterity with respect to ourselves.” To join the community requires us to commit ourselves to the here and now, to be involved in a given debt, to revel in this contagious and chance event not only with our ghostly fathers but with the Other ghosts, devoid of teleology and archaeology, and yet still within the void of our subjectivity.

We find ourselves in debt, deeply in debt, economically as Homo economicus

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20 Esposito gives us an extended explanation of the “timing” of community: “For this reason community is neither promised not to be disclosed beforehand, neither presupposed nor predetermined. Community doesn’t require a teleology nor an archaeology since the origin already lies in its after; the origin is already perfectly contemporaneous with what follows. It is the opening of being that is given by and in its withdrawal, and that draws back when it is offered, in the very trembling of our existence” (Communitas 18).

21 This passage appears on the back cover of Esposito’s Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community. It is quoted here because it summarizes the main gist of Esposito’s book.
and intellectually as *Homo sapiens*, when we try to come to terms with life. Our haunt/ontology of life is concerned not only about the “bitter necessity of debt” but also about our *exuberant* necessity of debt—to all the thinkers of life. Our debt to these thinkers of biopolitics is not a bitter one; rather we are bathed in the exuberance of this debt. What we have done here is to map out the debt relations among these thinkers, to show our indebtedness to their contribution(s) to the conception of biopolitics, and to quote, appropriate and transvaluate them without shame, without guilt, without remorse, and without reserve.

Where is life going? Where is the *topos* of biopolitics leading, or to be led? Why the hauntology of life now? These questions must be asked, pondered, thought otherwise. Our responsibility as heirs is to disturb the complacency of life, disorient the Hegelian dialectical and teleological thinking, interrogate the politics of life from the hauntological point of view, and accommodate the eternal return of the repressed, the oppressed, the unthought, the spiritual, the *différant*, the revenant, the ghostly, and the otherly Other. It is only through our active interpretation, our responsible intervention, our double-bind will to remembering and forgetfulness that as dutiful inheritors we can do justice to and transform the course of life and biopolitics. The Derridean calling of “inheritance” is messianic in spirit but deconstructive in practice. It extends its warm welcome to the coming of Other interpreters, be they reactive, reactionary, or revolutionary, and points to the weak messianic future for the generations to come.

*Viens, oui, oui.*²² These three weak-messianic words of Derrida promise us an ending without end and lead us to *Concentric’s* forthcoming issue on the “Angel of Newness.”

Coming to terms with life is to say yes to life for the life to come. . . .

Rejoice! Re-Joyce! Joys once again! Jouissance without end!

Come! Coming! “…yes I said yes I will Yes.”²³

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²² These words are quoted in John Caputo, p. 157, and taken originally from Derrida’s *Points de suspension: Entretiens*, p. 70. Caputo comments that these three words reveal “deconstruction in a word, in three words. In a nutshell” (157). “Come, yes, yes.” Like Nietzsche, Derrida is also a yes-sayer, using the word “come” as the opening word of his prayer and “the question of the yes” as the trans-driving force of his life. “For a very long time,” Derrida writes in *Acts of Literature*, “the question of the yes has mobilized and traversed everything I have been trying to think, write, teach or read” (287). Derrida’s “messianic without messianism,” echoing the Nietzschean call, bears witness to his unmistakable debt to Walter Benjamin.

²³ These rejoicing words are the final words of Molly Bloom’s litany-like soliloquy appearing at the very end of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In his letter to Frank Budgen, 16 August 1921, Joyce noted
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that the word “yes” is “the female word” (285). Derrida comments in Acts of Literature that the value of Molly’s “yes” is exactly its “gramophone effect,” namely the effect of iterability built into the word “yes”: “In order for the yes of affirmation, assent, consent, alliance, of engagement, signature, or gift to have the value it has, it must carry the repetition within itself. It must a priori and immediately confirm its promise and promise its confirmation” (276).


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