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## Review Essay

# Biopolitics 2.0: Reclaiming the power of life in the anthropocene

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## **The Microbial State: Global Thriving and the Body Politic**

Stefanie R Fishel

*Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 160 pp., ISBN 978-1-5179-0013-7*

## **Postcolonial Biology: Psyche and Flesh after Empire**

Deepika Bahri

*Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, 216 pp., ISBN 978-0-8166-9836-3*

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Biopolitics was once the preserve of critical Foucauldian-influenced theorists. This is no longer the case. The rise of new materialisms, networked and object-oriented ontologies and demands for the ‘renaturalization of politics’ (Grosz, 2011; Sharp, 2011) have turned the political into the biopolitical in much of radical contemporary political theory. Here, the biopolitical is often in tension with the Foucauldian discourses of the last few decades, affirming alternative possibilities rather than merely critiquing regimes of power (Malabou, 2008; Kirby, 2011; Taussig, 2018). One factor in this shift has been the impact of anthropogenic climate change and global warming on the contemporary political imagination, increasingly refracted through conceptualizations of the Anthropocene (Tsing, 2015; Cohen *et al.*, 2016; Chandler, 2018). A second factor has been that the life sciences no longer appear to support understandings of deterministic differences but rather to cast evolution in sympoietic and entangled ways, making biology appear as no longer essentialising but as increasingly importable into politics, in ways which disrupt modernist or liberal conceptions of the culture/nature divide (Haraway, 2016). Two important but very different engagements, which reflect these affirmative readings of biopolitics, are reviewed here, from the fields of postcolonial literature and gender and race in international politics.



I'd like to start by laying out the insights and framing of Stephanie Fishel's *The Microbial State*. This book is a well-worked deployment of the new materialist thesis of the world of 'lively matter' (the cover and publicity blurb feature a ringing endorsement from leading political theorist Jane Bennett). Fishel locates her work firmly in the camp of posthumanism, counterposing the modernist, 'anthropic' account of the state as 'the body politic' to one that takes into account the 'biospheric' and the 'microbial' (p. 2). The key conceptual point is to highlight that the biological is crucial to the bounded imaginary of the state as a community analogous to the human body. Both these conceptions of the bounded political subject – the individual in liberal political theory and the state in international theory – are products of the biopolitical blurring of culture and nature in atomising and essentialising ways.

Fishel critically uses the life sciences as a lens for alternative political imaginaries of complex and overlapping communities, which seek to overcome the homogenising 'body' metaphors of contemporary political discourse and the 'autonomous and autarkic' subjects of the biopolitical they produce (p. 15). Thus we move well beyond Foucault's Biopolitics 1.0, where biopolitics is a technology of management and control. Instead, Fishel provides a 'reversal of biopolitical critique, one that emphasizes vitality connection and entangled responsibility' (p. 21): 'This book takes life as a creative intensity that can offer new solutions, and new ways of engaging with the world' (p. 21). In the inversion or 'reversal' of biopolitical critique, the world and its entangled relationality becomes a potential cure for the dangerous 'immunitarian' and essentialising biopolitical logic of individual and state rights and interests (p. 27). The metaphors of entanglement, contamination, sympoiesis and intra-active becomings can facilitate and enable a new (multi-species) politics, capable of addressing the crises of global warming and species extinction in the Anthropocene.

Perhaps the most important conceptual move, in a range of interesting treatments, is the importance attached to the 'microbial' of the book title. Modernist, or human-centred, views of development and security treat the human or the state as separate and distinct entities and therefore as the referent for politics, through metaphors of conflict and militarism – with treatment as 'intervention', germs as 'enemies' or the 'war' against cancer (p. 49). Microbial and other entangled or relational metaphors enable alternative ontologies of being and becoming. If we seriously want to tackle contemporary problems, perhaps the starting point should instead be to ask, 'What would a microbe do?' (p. 56) Microscopic bacteria may seem 'small and simple' but they are what enable life to exist and highlight that living organisms are enmeshed in their environments, inside and out, enabling us 'to envision political community as an assemblage of multispecies groupings' (p. 56). Microbes enable us to go beyond binaries of self and other and to bring 'system-based understandings of complex processes' to the



political realm, enabling ‘different forms of practice for sustainable, ethical, global living with one another, and with other life forms, as a *bodies politic*’ (p. 61).

Processual and entangled ways of understanding politics change our attitude to problems and their governance; the questions become ‘more about various ecological relationships and balance, rather than resistance to invasion’ (p. 63). Key to microbial political possibilities is the removal of the keystone of modernist politics – the individual as subject – which ‘places the separateness of the human being as its most important trait’ (p. 69). ‘Biologically, at least, we are not intrinsically individuals, but collective super-organisms, assimilating multiple species and millions of individual organisms’ (p. 68). Microbial worlds enable us to question liberal and rationalist approaches that prioritise the individual over all other entities and collectives (this chimes well with other feminist science studies-informed work, equally suspicious of a liberal rights framework, for example, Clarke and Haraway, 2018).

Microbially-imagined or posthuman forms of governance enable creative awareness that ‘[I]n Kantian and humanist terms, an individual is always an end, not a means; therefore, the will of the individual cannot be sacrificed without consent’ (p. 69). Thus in Fishel’s reworking of the biopolitical, key targets are liberal conceptions of ‘freedom’ (p. 69), ‘sovereignty, law and democracy’, which will need to be redefined. Microbes enable us to see the artifice behind the distinctions of liberal political theory, of separate entities with distinct rights and interests: ‘From this perspective it is impossible not to see the similarities between relationships in the internal relations between members of microbiotic communities in the human gut and the relations between member of a political society’ (p. 75). Rather than conflictual self-interests – the stuff of human-centred political communities – microbes enable us to imagine a politics of collaboration: ‘the human gut, in this book... is exemplified as a community in which very few relationships are pathogenic’ (p. 87).

The microbial message of multi-species becoming is clear, with ‘new definitions of health for the state based on expanded notions of health through plurality... plurality and stimulation, not autonomy and purity, lead to strength’ (p. 90). Fishel is well aware that what I am calling ‘Biopolitics 2.0’ – with its affirmative use of biological metaphors – runs the risk, associated with all imports from biology into the political, of carrying ‘illiberal and conservative connotations’, but she stresses that ‘modern biology and current biological thinking’ are different, ‘no longer based on static equilibrium or a bare struggle for survival expounded by neo-Darwinist theories of evolution’ (p. 101). Rather than fixed entities fighting for distinct interests, microbial imaginaries are ones of collective and sympoietic becoming. This is a process of constant change and transformation, of ‘posthuman becoming’ and ‘biocultural hope’; entanglements with others make all of us ‘co-evolved symbionts’ (p. 102) where ‘the world is a joint product between the human and the non-human... composing the world together’ (p. 105).



Fishel's thesis of 'the reversal of biopolitics' claims to 'open a space to reformulate biopolitics more positively by affirming life as vital and relational rather than a purely mechanical reaction against that which is Other' (p. 108). Fishel is keen to flag up that in 'mining the hermeneutic potential of the life sciences' (p. 113) she is not forwarding 'science as a Western imperial project' (p. 116) – but seeking rather 'to redesign, traverse, and complicate the body politic' through using 'alternate visions of science' to 'demonstrate that hybridity and heterogeneity are necessary elements for understanding the nature of the individual and the individual's connection to the larger world' (p. 116). The contemporary biological turn – with its rejection of Darwinist conceptions of 'survival of the fittest' and imaginaries of the 'tree of life' with separate and distinct lines of evolution – here provides a powerful critique of liberal imaginaries of security and development, with the underlying deterministic telos of hierarchy, competition and progress. The ideas of the contemporary life sciences – which are rewriting nature as creative and interactive rather than as passive and determined and emphasise hybridity, transference across species boundaries, symbiosis and sympoietic becoming – would seem a vital source of inspiration for alternative political imaginaries.

The second book under review, Deepika Bahri's *Postcolonial Biology*, engages the biopolitical moment from the angle of rereading and deconstructing embodied themes of transformation, hybridity and transference across racialized boundaries in postcolonial literature. It is productive to read her book alongside Fishel's as Bahri both complicates and reinforces the points made above regarding the political and conceptual productivity of biologically-informed political imaginaries. Bahri states from the outset that her book 'claims biology as a valid – indeed a crucial – area of interest for critical postcolonial studies' as '[T]he socio-political challenges of the twenty-first century require us to look beyond biologically deterministic conceptions of racialized difference to porous, pliable, and plastic bodies and psyches as critically embattled zones of conflict in the wake of imperial modernity' (p. viii). Bahri's point is that the blurring of the nature/culture divide and the view of life as hybrid, processual, disruptive and transformative – rather than differentiated, deterministic and static – is not simply the preserve of contemporary posthumanist theorists but was already present in colonial discourses of governance with the 'implicitly *reincarnative* politics of the so-called civilizing mission in imperial modernity' (p. 2).

Whilst it is easy to cast modernity as hegemonised by a Darwinian 'racist science' which 'assumed that genetics locked in differences between races', the colonial gaze, in fact, 'implied an as-yet scientifically unverified but implicit belief in human bioplasticity and aesthetic reformation' (p. 3). Ideas of distinct bounded bio-social political communities – or bodies politic – 'were complicated by imperial designs on impressionable, *plastic* body-minds at the level of ideology as well as the micromanagement of the subject's bio-physiology' (p. 3). For Bahri,



today's new materialist or posthuman ontologies of human and non-human entanglement of nature and culture can be read as already implicit in, and also as a response to, colonial discourses of civilizing mission (p. 3).

Bahri highlights that Darwinian perspectives, with their implied lines of genetic determination, were not as dominant in the early twentieth century social sciences as socio-biological discourses of *indeterminism*, with Lamarckian views of acquired characteristics the bridge between culture and race (p. 152 n. 25). Colonial and postcolonial views of the bio-social thus become an 'instructive precursor to the nexus of capital, corporation, and the biopolitics of hybridity in the global present' (p. 5). While old biological determinism produced 'bad science and even worse politics' (p. 6), the construction of the body as 'pliant, bio-mentally plastic and permeable', for Bahri, 'is a battlefield no less worthy of our urgent attention' (p. 6). Thus the contemporary revisiting of the biopolitical – Biopolitics 2.0 – is perhaps more usefully understood as a struggle waged on the grounds of a Lamarckian creationism, where bottom-up 'bio-cultural hope' stands as an open and creative counter to top-down views of the manipulation of hybrid becomings, central to the colonial mission.

Bahri examines how colonial discourses operated not on a strict separation between biology and culture, but rather on the construction of a sliding scale interconnecting nature and culture, which imbricated both the life sciences and the humanities, constructing them as distinct and yet flexibly co-constitutive disciplines. It was this continuum that enabled ideas of racial distinction and genetic determination to easily morph back and forth with ideas of social, cultural and environmental hybridity and transformation. The colonial civilizing mission inevitably overlaid views of fixed genetic distinctions and determinations with bio-social discourses of epigenetic transformation, which blurred the distinction between culture and nature, enabling colonial hierarchies to be constructed and played out through transformative imaginaries that biologized cultural attributes. Bahri draws out well how these colonial discourses exposed the 'weak link' of modernist or Enlightenment thought, in politicizing the biological as the keystone of Otherness. In the bio-social construction of the Other as inferior there is the implication that the outside is always already present on the inside, as more real or 'authentic'. Thus, in her citing of Fanon, for the colonial mind, it is always the Other who is the 'bringer of biology' or the one who 'symbolizes the biological' (p. 29).

Bahri's book engages with three novels, all of which deal with postcolonial framings of hybrid becoming: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*; Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*; and Julian Barnes' *Unofficial Englishmen, Arthur and George*. The key characters in these novels all aspire to becoming other, confronting postcolonial biology through discourses of culture and aesthetics with the body as the site or battleground of bio-cultural adaptive transformation. It is the 'biological body, its sounds, odours, excretions, urges, emissions, and expressions'



upon which the ‘civilizational project’ is expressed and measured (p. 11). Culture and nature are conflated at the same time as they are constructed as two poles of the human and the non-human. The key point being made is that the politics of race is an epiphenomenon of a deeper and more essential aspect of modernist and Enlightenment thought, the distinction between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’, which overcodes racial and colonial discourses of ‘civilization’ and today’s ‘developmental aesthetics’ (p. 135).

Bahri’s work is also useful to understand today’s import of the contemporary life sciences into radical political imaginaries, as she seeks to draw from the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, who maintained the colonial ‘sliding scale’ but used this to critique the empty and ‘hollowed subject’ of the bourgeois rationalist Enlightenment (p. 31). The continuum and interplay between the biological and the socio-cultural-political was maintained, but the radical goal was to return to an awareness of the interdependencies, interconnections and entanglements of the ‘biological’. While the colonial civilizing mission sought to develop a bio-social science of transformation and hybridity to enable ‘becoming modern’ or ‘becoming liberal’, the radical response was to flag up the artifice and hubris of modernity’s attempt to repress or erase our entangled biological being.

Thus for Biopolitics 2.0, with a more affirmative framing of nature and the biological, the weak link – exposed by the colonial discourse of ‘civilizing mission’ and blurring of the biological and cultural – can be turned against the advocates of the modernist episteme. Having understood the inherently oppressive logic of ‘instrumental rationality’ and the human/non-human, nature/culture hierarchical divides, the way is then clear for the return of biology as an alternative way of conceiving ‘life’ without modernist/colonial binaries and bifurcations (p. 142). Thus it is possible for the colonial discourses of plasticity with their ‘vague sociobiological *indeterminism*’ (p. 152 n. 25) to become repurposed for imagining creative and open alternative futures.

The underlying stakes in biologically-inflected discourses of transformative and hybrid becoming were inevitably imbricated within universalist and modernist paradigms of development and progress. This is still the case today, except that the idea of the ‘sliding scale’ of civilization is transposed. In the Anthropocene, ideas of the superiority of the ‘human’ over the ‘nonhuman’ or of ‘culture’ over ‘nature’ or of ‘civilized’ over ‘indigenous’ have lost their credence. It is little surprise that the crisis of modernity has enabled the inversion of hegemonic, modernising and colonial frames of transformation. This fundamental shift, nurturing a new and affirmative assessment of the life that was previously repressed or excluded is well reflected in the two books reviewed here. Whereas Foucauldian-informed biopolitical critique railed against the reduction of the human to ‘bare life’, or of political life to biological existence, Biopolitics 2.0 inverts the assumptions, seeking to reinvest ‘mere life’ with meaningfulness and value: even life in its



smallest and simplest microbial forms can make the human look insignificant and facilitate more creative political imaginaries.

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