Biopolitics and Political Space

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In his 2001 review of Carlo Galli’s book *Spazi politici*,¹ Antonio Negri argues that Galli is silent on a subtle but decisive question: “what is the space of the biopolitical?”² The purpose of this little note is to generate three responses to Negri’s question from within the horizon of Galli’s thought, each response more intent than the next “to use the concept in order to reach beyond the concept.”³

1.

One of the reasons Michel Foucault began rethinking the term “biopolitics” in the first place was to name one of the specificities of modern governmental reason: its shift away from territory and toward population as the primary object of its modes of governmentality.⁴ On Foucauldian terms, at least, to speak of “biopolitics” is thus, almost by definition, already to have set aside questions of space as epiphenomenal, so much so that the notion of a “space of the biopolitical” amounts less to conjunction than to catachresis.⁵ But while both Galli and Negri read Foucault very closely, they also share another thinker as well, one for whom biopolitics and space are not at all incommensurable. Carl Schmitt, like Foucault, cites the figure of the shepherd in Plato’s Statesman as the genealogical precursor for the ministers and ministries who take charge of the health and welfare of populations in the modern administrative state.⁶ Much more than Foucault, however, Schmitt understands the work of the shepherd to be constitutively bound to space. In Schmitt’s rendering, the shepherd (nomeus) cannot nourish, care for, tend to, and provide for his flock in the absence of a life-sustaining “pastureland” (which is one of the translations Schmitt gives for nomos).⁷ The same understanding implicitly informs Schmitt’s claim about the Grossraum as well: the latter is not simply a “large space,” but is always already also what the Nazis called a Lebensraum—a “living space,” a concrete space where the occupation, partition, and distribution of land is grounded in the duty to care for, and enable the multiplication of, a specific population.⁸ In this sense, Schmitt’s concept of the nomos is—in the worst possible way, in a mode

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ISSN 1479-1420 (print)/ISSN 1479-4233 (online) © 2012 National Communication Association
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2012.659471
Foucault would call “thanatopolitical”9—an attempt to think population and space as part of one and the same theoretical problematic. Here we arrive at a first “Gallian” response to Negri. Because “political space” is Galli’s gloss on Schmitt’s concept of nomos,10 and because a certain experience of “biopolitics” is implicit in the very concept of “nomos,” all “political spaces” will always already have been, in some way or another, “biopolitical spaces.” The space of the biopolitical does not then go unthought in Political Spaces; it appears to be “absent” only and precisely because it is presupposed throughout Galli’s entire book.

2.

Negri’s question, however, implies a second possible impasse. If the age of “biopolitics” is, as François Ewald put it, an age when “everything is political,”11 would not “biopolitics” imply the incoherence of the Schmittian concept of “the political” (which, as Hans Blumenberg noted, becomes incoherent under conditions where “everything is political”12)? Even though there is no “political space” that is not also implicitly biopolitical, would not the reverse not then hold? Would not “biopolitics” in Foucault’s sense imply the disappearance of any and all spaces that are “political” in the strict Schmittian sense presupposed by Galli?

Here too we need to return to Foucault, only this time not to his explicit thoughts on biopolitics, but rather to his remark on one of the crises that spurred him to problematize the notion of biopolitics to begin with: the power of nuclear war “to expose a population to general death,” a potential the emergence of which Foucault interpreted as the extreme “end-point” of modern government’s management of life, race, and survival.13 As self-evident as these remarks might at first seem, they cannot in the end be taken at face value. If Galli is not off the mark when he argues that every “political thought” is both grounded in and riven by an implicit “political space” that remains inaccessible to it and ruins it from within,14 then Foucault’s explicit thoughts on biopolitics might be better understood as occluded insights into an experience of “polemicity” (as Galli calls it15) that is quite neglected in the scholarly literature on Foucault’s writings on biopolitics—even though, as Foucault himself seemed to suggest in 1978, it was decisive for the emergence of his thought in that decade.16

During the Algerian War, French military theorists such as Roger Trinquier and David Galula developed a theory of warfare called “counterinsurgency.” In this sort of warfare, these theorists argued, the military’s objective is not “the occupation of enemy territory” (as Carl von Clausewitz once defined the goal of offensive war17), but the control of populations.18 In particular, counterinsurgency warfare requires the military to understand populations on the paradigm of a “sea” or “swamp” that must be drained in order to isolate the insurgents who, in orthodox Maoist terms, are said to live like “fish” within it.19 For this reason, counterinsurgency is warfare in which there is no longer any rigorous distinction between military force (although, of course, no counterinsurgent renounces the use of asymmetrical military technologies such as air power), and police power (such as the census, pass-cards, checkpoints,
and preventative detention). Above all, the counterinsurgent encounters a population in which the distinction between friend and enemy has dissolved into indistinction, where it is impossible for the counterinsurgent to tell who in the population is a combatant and who is a non-combatant, and where, as such, novel and often brutal techniques of administrative control (all of which are focused on forcing the individuals who comprise a given population to “choose a side”) are deployed upon populations as the prior condition upon which the use of military force against an “enemy” or “combatant” may then proceed. Because counterinsurgency is war that aims at the control of populations in this manner, and because the goal of such war, for counterinsurgent and insurgent alike, is therefore “to outadminister the enemy before it starts to fight it,” counterinsurgency may be understood as the explicit weaponization of an administrative apparatus that—especially in French colonial rule—was always already implicitly martial to begin with. It is war that will be won by the military force that deploys the most effective biopolitical dispositif—the side that best reconciles merciless military violence with merciful administrative apparatuses capable of maintaining the health, welfare, safety, and security of specific populations. The aim of counterinsurgency is still “to disarm the enemy,” but now in a new and different way: by substituting the counterinsurgent’s own administrative, bureaucratic, or organizational apparatuses for those of the insurgent (or, in the case of Algeria, the replacement of the Front de Libération Nationale with the Dispositif de Protection Urbain). The administration of life, for counterinsurgency theorists, is not only a means to the end of victory; it is also the end itself, the permanent form that victory itself assumes when and where it has been attained.

The point of recalling all of this is not, of course, to suggest that Foucault designed his theory of “biopolitics” with French counterinsurgency in mind. It is to outline a “Gallian” reading of Foucault, in order to generate a second response to Negri. Foucault’s observations on the biopolitical management of “life, species, and race,” it would seem, are best exemplified not by atomic warfare’s sudden obliteration of populations (the instrumentality, hostility, and violence of which, at least by Foucault’s own later account, would seem to distinguish it from power relations in the strict sense), but by the chronically weaponized management of populations specific to colonial political space. On this read, the “implicit spatiality” for Foucault’s account of the dispositif of “biopolitics” is not the appearance of the “providential state” within the French metropole; it is the “armed version” of the same that emerged in the French postcolony (where, as Schmitt noted in 1962, a discourse on “risk” also materialized, though for reasons quite different from the sense of “solidarity” that allowed for the rise of “insurance” in France itself). And the problem that demands our interpretive attention is not that Galli’s “political space” leaves “biopolitics” unthought; it is that Foucault’s “biopolitics,” as thought, is governed by the “polemicity” of a political space to which Foucault himself was, by his own 1978 account, at once very close and very far, and about which he remained, perhaps for that very reason, almost completely silent.
3.

None of this, however, should detract from the explicit dimension of Foucault’s text, namely, the very clear place and function he gives to nuclear annihilation in the “critique of the present” that led him to problematize “life itself.” If atomic war is, for Foucault, the sharpest symptom of the terminal crisis of the modern liberal state, this is because it marks the paradoxical completion of the secularized principle on which the modern liberal state is founded (which, as Hannah Arendt once put it, is that “life is the highest good”). With atomic war, the techniques used by modern states to protect the lives of one and all turn out to have culminated in a technology capable of negating the lives of one and all (both enemies and friends, as Schmitt would point out). Treating “biopolitics” now as a name for the specific problematization of life and politics that revealed itself to Foucault in and through this terminal crisis, we become able to offer a third response to Negri—one that now, however, carries the concepts at work in Galli’s text beyond its immanent horizon.

In the late 1960s, the US Department of Defense began funding the research and development of computer networking, with the aim of creating a system of command, control, and communication so flexible and decentralized that it could withstand a successful enemy attack on any one of its nodes, up to and including a nuclear attack. One result of this research and development was a technique of data management called “packet-switching,” which allows one user of a communications system to send information simultaneously to multiple other users. This technique was first operationalized in a US Department of Defense computer system called “Advanced Research Projects Agency Network” (ARAPNET), which is widely recognized as the origin of the global Internet in its contemporary form. The network that seems so normal a part of everyday life today was, in other words, called into being on the basis of a most exceptional presupposition: that the apparatus of the state (and above all, as one of ARAPNET’s founding figures argued, its economy) can and should survive a nuclear attack that much or even most of the state’s populations would not survive. From a genealogical perspective, then, the Internet cannot be interpreted simply as a device for the communication of information; it is also (perhaps even primarily) a military technology the very spatial form of which—decentralization—is itself a strategic preparation for an atomic war, the inevitability of which is its raison d’être. Thanatopolitics is hard-wired, as it were, into the political space of the network itself.

Within the horizon of the “non-Schmittian Schmittology” that Galli seeks to open up as a privileged optic for the analysis of the global age, this has an important implication: it teaches us that the political space of the network (“cyberspace”) originates from the same crisis that spurred the thought of biopolitics itself. Because the political space of the network presupposes the inevitability of the same new mode of “polemicity” (nuclear warfare), the threat of which provoked Foucault to think through and name a new form of politics (“biopolitics”), cyberspace and biopolitics are, in the terms of Gallian genealogy, two “faces” of the same double-sided origin of the global age. From this standpoint, there is indeed something “unthinkable”
about the political space of biopolitics—but now in a sense less catachrestic than catastrophic, and catastrophic indeed in more than one sense. Most populations today do not, suffice it to say, participate in the networks of information and communication technology that so many globalization theorists consider paradigmatic. Nor, however, does it seem that participation of this sort can or will be forthcoming at any point soon, despite the fervent wishes of philanthropists and neoliberal economists, who seem to regard the so-called “digital divide” as nothing more than a temporary and technologically remediable contingency. To the contrary, this divide seems to be, in Schmittian terms—in terms where Großräume are always also Lebensräume—little more than the most explicit sign of the increasingly stark partition of the globalized world into “two humanities”: one that occupies the “death zone” of destitution, underdevelopment, and exposure to violence; and the other that dwells in the “life zone” of consumption, overdevelopment, and security. From this perspective, the various communicative devices that together constitute the digital network of the “industrial hypomnesic milieu,” as Bernard Stiegler has called it, do not at all herald a cosmopolitan future of borderless global citizens engaging in cooperative and participative “Twitter Revolutions.” They instead imply a political space that is at once incommensurable with the network’s paradigms of thought (for, in a spatial model defined by the possibility of every node communicating with every other node, the only figure of political space that should be impossible is, precisely, separation) and indispensable for the network’s survival (for no technique of communication, least of all the Internet, can preserve itself absent the techniques of separation that provide immunity from danger and risk). Cyberspace, no less than the other spatial theories Galli thinks, thus depends for its coherence on a figure of political space—in this case, the biopolitical partition of the networked from the un-networked—it is also constitutively unable to think.

William Gibson’s 1984 Neuromancer, the novel that introduced the term “cyberspace” to the English language, concludes on a beach, a place of indistinction between land and sea. It is there that the artificial intelligence network called “Wintermute” issues its seductive challenge to Henry Dorsett Case, the novel’s hacker counter-hero: “To live here is to live. There is no difference.” During the heady years of the 1990s, it was tempting to hear in this challenge an invitation to enter once and for all into a utopia of smooth, virtual space—where it would be possible to experience the reconciliation of old modern oppositions between machine and organism, life and death, finitude and infinitude, biology and technology, etc. It was as if the Internet and its various teletechnical cousins would enable postmodern man—finally—to become the “prosthetic God” modern man had always believed himself to be. Interpreted as a statement about biopolitics, however, Wintermute’s challenge takes on a much different tone. It becomes intelligible as a cold assertion about the biopolitical partitions that subtend cyberspace itself, as if to live elsewhere than “here” were to live nowhere at all, to live without really even living, in a milieu that is properly speaking no milieu at all, but instead a thanatopolitical space, a “death zone,” a space of indifference and abandonment. This partition, implicit in the “here” to which Wintermute refers, would be no less essential to the political space of the
network than is the threat of nuclear warfare. It would simply belong to that space according to a much different modality, manifesting itself through a different phenomenology: in contrast to the sudden bloom of nuclear annihilation, the slowness and obscurity of “cruddy death.” It is as if Schmitt’s concept of the political did not dissolve with the onset of the global age, but instead morphed into a new form, one no less cruel for being grounded in a schema thoroughly non-Schmittian in shape. The “amity line” proper to the network, it would seem, is not the political distinction between friend and enemy, but the teletechnical distinction between (to modify the language of Facebook) the friendable and the unfriendable: between individuals whose access to digital prosthetics qualifies them as potential friends, on the one hand; and, on the other, populations whose lack of any such access disqualifies them in advance from the same (without also, however, elevating them to the status of enemies; for just as biopolitics entails “racism without races,” so too does it entail a strange sort of “racism without hate,” a faceless racism that lacks the heated relations of enmity specific to the Schmittian concept of “the political”).

Here then, a last “Gallian” response to Negri: the political space of biopolitics is the network, but the genealogy of the network reveals it to imply not one but two catastrophes, both of which are unthinkable on the network’s own terms: not only the specter of the nuclear annihilation the network was designed to survive, but also the possibility that Galli’s promising strategy for executing the Schmittian “testament”—Galli’s call, that is to say, for the creation of non-Schmittian political spaces—will fail. And this, in turn, would oblige us to contemplate a last unthinkable: that new and more sophisticated walls are the most for which we can hope from any properly “biopolitical space,” that apartheid is not the past but the future.

Notes


[29] In 1978, Foucault noted his paradoxical “distance” from the typical French experience with the Algerian War, to which he was exposed while teaching in Tunisia. See Foucault, “Interview with Michel Foucault,” *Power*, 258, 278–9.

[30] The same could be said for Jacques Derrida, though according to a much different modality. See “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” trans. Catherine Porter and Phillip Lewis, *diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 28, 30. It also could be said of the poet Wendell Berry, whose 1968 poem “A Discipline”—a meditation on nuclear warfare—concludes with the following lines: “it is the time’s discipline to think/of the death of all living, and yet live.” Wendell Berry, “A Discipline,” in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1998), 77.


[34] Sitze, “Editor’s Introduction,” liv–lxiv.


