

○ VOLUME 17 NUMBER 2, 2018

BOOK REVIEW

**An Analytics of Biopolitics**

Catherine Mills, *Biopolitics*, New York: Routledge, 2018

**Jacob Vinje**

University of Lethbridge

*Beginning with Foucault's foundational conceptualisation of biopower, and the associated emergence of biopolitical techniques of governance, Catherine Mills' Biopolitics offers a comprehensive introductory overview of theoretical approaches to biopolitics that is conceptually and stylistically clear without sacrificing theoretical sophistication or analytical rigour. On the one hand, Biopolitics provides a theoretical overview of the work of several key theorists of biopolitics—including Foucault, Agamben, Arendt, Hardt, Negri, and Esposito—and, on the other hand, it adopts an analytical approach by critically engaging with contemporary approaches to biopolitics organised around the problematics of politics, life, and subjectivity. Biopolitics thus offers a thorough introduction to theoretical approaches and contemporary debates in biopolitical studies that will be of interest to students and scholars due to its theoretical sophistication, pedagogical clarity, and critical interventions with regard to biopolitical thought.*

Taking up Foucault's diagnosis of a fundamental reorientation in the operation of power at the end of the eighteenth century brought about by the subsumption of sovereign power under biopower, biopolitics as a field of scholarly inquiry has recently experienced proliferating interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary engagements across the social sciences and humanities. For Foucault, where sovereign power was defined by the sovereign right to 'take life or let live' (Foucault 1978, p. 136), biopower can conversely be characterised by the right to 'make live and to let die' (Foucault 2003, p. 241). In other words, where sovereignty operated through the exertion of prohibitive and repressive forms of power, biopower conversely 'exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimise, and multiply it, subjecting it to

precise controls and comprehensive regulations' (Foucault 1978, p. 137). Under this general rubric of biopower, Foucault identifies the operation of two corresponding techniques of governance: on the one hand, the exertion of disciplinary techniques of governance on bodies, which 'produces individualising effects, and manipulates the body as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile' (Foucault 2003, p. 249); and, on the other hand, the operation of biopolitics, or regulatory and normative techniques of governance which take the population, as a vital and biological entity, to be the object of governmental intervention, management, administration, and normalisation. Thus, biopower is constituted by the articulation of disciplinary and biopolitical techniques of governance. As Catherine Mills explains in her introductory text *Biopolitics*, biopower 'places the new political subject of the population at the centre of governmental calculations, and one of its key problematics is the fostering of life through the political conjunction of the individual and the population' (Mills 2018, p. 2). Biopolitics, as Mills characterises it, thus refers to 'the emergence and development of a governmental rationality focused on the vital phenomena of the population and the correlative techniques used to manage them' (Mills 2018, p. 5) associated with the rise of biopower.

Beginning with Foucault's foundational conceptualisation of biopower, and the associated emergence of biopolitical techniques of governance, Catherine Mills' *Biopolitics* offers a comprehensive introductory overview of theoretical approaches to biopolitics that is conceptually and stylistically clear without sacrificing theoretical sophistication or analytical rigour. As Mills explains, with *Biopolitics* she aims to 'give an overview of the contemporary field of biopolitical studies, which entails introducing the main theoretical frameworks and approaches, as well as outlining some of the ways in which the concept has been put to work' (Mills 2018, p. 6). Toward this end, *Biopolitics* serves two functions: on the one hand, Mills offers a theoretical overview of the work of several key theorists of biopolitics—most notably Foucault, Agamben, Arendt, Hardt, Negri, and Esposito—and, on the other hand, she critically engages with contemporary employments of these approaches to biopolitics in a growing interdisciplinary body of scholarship which Mills broadly characterises as 'biopolitical studies' (Mills 2018, p. 5) that is concerned with questions of politics, life, and subjectivity.

The first half of Mills' text is divided into four chapters, each of which engages in a detailed exposition of the theoretical frameworks of biopolitics advanced by a crucial theorist (or series of theorists) of biopolitical thought. While Mills' discussion in these introductory chapters is primarily targeted at audiences who may be unfamiliar with key theoretical frameworks and contemporary debates in biopolitical studies, she also offers incisive critiques and critical reevaluations of these theoretical approaches that will be of interest to scholars who are familiar with these foundational approaches to biopolitics. The second half of Mills' text shifts focus to a thematic analysis of contemporary debates and issues in biopolitical studies, which are broadly organised

under the rubrics of *politics*, *life*, and *subjectivity*. Through this discussion, Mills introduces contemporary debates and approaches in biopolitical thought related to politics, life, and subjectivity, and offers critical analyses of, and interventions into, these debates and approaches from her own perspective as a critical feminist bioethicist (Mills is an Associate Professor of Bioethics at Monash University). Specifically, through maintaining analytical focus on the biopolitical problematics of politics, life, and subjectivity, Mills engages in what Lemke refers to as an 'analytics of biopolitics'—that is, a critical examination of the 'network of relations among power processes, knowledge practices, and modes of subjectivation' (Lemke 2011, p. 119) related to the deployment of 'life' and 'politics' through biopolitical regimes of 'making live' and 'letting die'. To this end, with *Biopolitics*, Mills offers both accessible introductory explanations of theoretical approaches and contemporary debates in biopolitical thought, and analytically rigorous critical insights into these theoretical frameworks, by effectively engaging in an analytics of biopolitics.

In the first chapter, Mills discusses Foucault's foundational theorisation of the emergence of biopower, and the associated rise of biopolitical techniques of governance. Mills suggests that for Foucault, the emergence of biopower is characterised by the historical subsumption of sovereign power, and, as Foucault explains, 'the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live' which characterised sovereignty was supplanted by the operation of biopower, the 'power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death' (Foucault 1978, p. 138). Importantly, Mills is careful to note that this transition is a historical *subsumption*, rather than an explicit *rupture* in the operation of power, insofar as the sovereign right to kill continues to operate alongside biopower in Foucault's theoretical framework. With the emergence of biopower, Foucault identifies the operation of two correlated techniques of governance: discipline, which controls and optimises individual capacities, and biopolitics, which regulates and normalises the biological characteristics of populations. Throughout her discussion of these concepts, Mills carefully delineates Foucault's conceptualisations of biopower and biopolitics, broadly defining biopower as 'a power that administers and fosters life' and biopolitics as techniques of governance 'focused on the species-body and its biological characteristics ... in order to subject them to measurement and regulatory control' (Mills 2018, p. 15). Mills also foregrounds the central function of what Foucault refers to as 'state racism' in the operation of biopolitics, suggesting that he considers state racism as 'a way of establishing a biological-type caesura within a population' (Foucault 2003, p. 255) and, in turn, justifying biopolitical calculations that determine which segments of that population will be made to live, and which will be allowed to die. In the latter half of the chapter, Mills traces the genealogy of the concept of biopower throughout Foucault's theoretical work, contending that 'while only explicitly discussed at a few points, the concept of biopower is an important point of conjunction for a number of Foucault's concerns' (Mills 2018, p. 13). To this end, Mills examines Foucault's discussions of the birth of modern medicine and the emergence of life as an object of knowledge, his movement from archaeology to genealogy as

method, and his subsequent genealogical examination of power in order to trace the theoretical continuity of biopower throughout his work. Mills concludes the chapter by positing Foucault's later conceptualisations of ethical subjectivity, freedom, and technologies of the self as possible points of resistance to biopower.

In the subsequent three chapters, Mills proceeds by examining the theoretical contributions of Agamben, Arendt, Hardt, Negri, and Esposito to biopolitical thought. Importantly, Mills situates Agamben's approach, which she characterises as 'thanatopolitical' insofar as it foregrounds the implications of biopolitics in regimes of 'letting die', in opposition to what she identifies as the 'affirmative biopolitics' of Hardt, Negri, and Esposito, which highlights the function of biopolitics in regimes of 'making live'. Mills begins by examining Agamben's revision of Foucault's theoretical approach to biopolitics, in which he argues that biopolitics is historically coextensive with and immanent to the operation of sovereign power, and did not emerge through a historical rupture or break from sovereignty. As Mills explains, 'for Agamben there is little distinction to be made between sovereignty and biopower, since in his view the Western political tradition has been biopolitical from its inception' (Mills 2018, p. 38). Thus, for Agamben, the incorporation of life into the domain of politics is the 'original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power', and, consequently, *'the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power'* (Agamben 1998, p. 6). Here, Agamben suggests that life is simultaneously incorporated into and expelled from the domain of politics through what he refers to as the relation of exception, resulting in the production of bare life, or 'the politicised form of natural life' (Mills 2018, p. 45), which is consequently subject to the sovereign right of death in its state of abandonment by law. To this end, as Mills explains, 'bare life emerges through the irreparable exposure of life to death in the sovereign ban, such that the politicisation of life is ultimately nothing other than its exposure to death, particularly in and through sovereign violence' (Mills 2018, p. 45). Therefore, insofar as bare life is subject to the sovereign right of death, Mills argues that within Agamben's theoretical framework, 'the supposed politics of life is in fact a politics of death—not *biopolitics*, but *thanatopolitics*' (Mills 2018, p. 44). Mills also identifies theoretical consistencies between Agamben's notion of bare life and Arendt's conceptualisation of the stateless subject, who she suggests is abjected from the domain of politics through the withdrawal of human rights, and consequently exposed to the sovereign right of death. However, Mills suggests that Arendt's notion of natality signals a departure from Agamben's thanatopolitics, insofar as it gestures towards an affirmative biopolitics that foregrounds the biopolitical logic of 'making live'.

In opposition to this thanatopolitical characterisation of Agamben's biopolitics, Mills suggests that Hardt, Negri, and Esposito develop an 'affirmative biopolitics' oriented towards fostering, reinforcing, and reproducing life. For Hardt and Negri, the possibility of this affirmative biopolitics emerges through the relation between Empire, a postmodern global order characterised by imperial sovereignty, and the multitude,

the plurality of productive and creative labouring subjects who sustain Empire through biopolitical modes of production. Insofar as Empire is predicated upon the biopolitical production of the multitude, Mills suggests that the multitude retains the capacity to resist and transform the relations of domination reproduced by Empire, and thus 'constitute alternative political and social forms of life' (Mills 2018, p. 87). As Mills explains, for Hardt and Negri 'Empire and its kernel of biopolitical production is positioned against the affirmative and creative power of the multitude', while the multitude constitutes 'an immanent revolutionary force that presents the limit and possible transformation of sovereignty, including in its supra-national form of Empire' (Mills 2018, p. 88). Thus, Mills contends that Hardt and Negri employ an affirmative approach to biopolitics by foregrounding the productive, creative, and revolutionary capacities of the multitude to produce new regimes of living. Similarly, Mills suggests that Esposito develops an affirmative biopolitics through his discussion of the immunitary paradigm, which posits that 'social and political systems have at their centre a self-defensive logic by which the danger to be defended against is incorporated into the system, in such a way as to generate an appropriate defence' (Mills 2018, p. 89). In this regard, the logic of immunisation incorporates the articulation of biopolitical regimes of 'making live' and 'letting die', and, as Mills explains, Esposito 'does not reiterate the oppositional construal of biopolitics as either negative or positive; rather, he elaborates the ways in which the logic of immunisation actually incorporates both the negative and positive in a paradoxical logic of protection through exposure' (Mills 2018, p. 89). However, Esposito identifies a transposition of life and death in the immunitary paradigm, whereby the protection of a population requires 'putting to death all those that were seen to threaten its health and vitality' (Mills 2018, p. 98). Consequently, immunisation operates along the coordinates of a 'biopolitical logic whereby the protection of life reverses into the production of death' (Mills 2018, p. 97). To this end, Esposito works to develop an affirmative biopolitics that is not founded on the logic of immunisation, whereby the protection and reinforcement of life and vitality are not predicated on thanatopolitical regimes of 'letting die'.

In the following two chapters, Mills engages more explicitly in an analytics of biopolitics by tracing the genealogy of the concepts of 'life' and 'politics' as they have been mobilised by theorists of biopolitics. Of particular interest in these chapters is Mills' consideration of regimes of 'making live' and 'letting die' as they have been taken up by biopolitical theorists following Foucault's characterisation of biopower as the power to '*foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death' (Foucault 1978, p. 138). In her consideration of the biopolitical logic of 'making live' and 'letting die', Mills situates Agamben's thanatopolitical approach to biopolitics, which is predicated on the mobilisation of the sovereign right to kill through the production of a biopolitical body and the abjection of bare life, in opposition to Rose and Rabinow's approach to biopolitics, which posits that 'central to the configuration of contemporary biopower are all those endeavours that have life, not death, as their telos' (Rabinow & Rose 2006, p. 203). However, Mills suggests that insofar as these

approaches foreground the function of biopolitics in either fostering life or disallowing it, they fail to consider the articulation of regimes of 'making live' and 'letting die' as they are deployed through biopolitical governance. To this end, Mills suggests that Foucault's approach to biopower as the power to 'make live and to let die' (Foucault 2003, p. 241) effectively overcomes these limitations, as it identifies the continued operation of the sovereign right to kill, or what Foucault refers to as the 'death-function in the economy of biopower' (Foucault 2003, p. 258), alongside the right to 'make live' within biopolitical frameworks. Further, Mills considers Mbembe's important interventions into biopolitical thought in his discussion of necropolitics, or 'contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death' (Mbembe 2003, p. 39), which he argues is irreducible to the biopolitical right to 'make live and let die'. To this end, Mbembe argues that biopower is conceptually insufficient to account for the operation of necropolitics, which functions to interpellate subjects as 'living dead', and, in turn, produce 'death-worlds' in which programmatic killing constitutes its primary objective (Mbembe 2003, p. 40). Importantly, throughout her discussion of the biopolitical logic of 'making live' and 'letting die', Mills traces the contingency of the concept of 'life' itself as it has been employed by biopolitical theorists, including Foucault, who genealogically examines the emergence of 'life' as an object of knowledge and governmental intervention, and Rose and Rabinow, who examine destabilisations and reconfigurations of 'life' in the context of proliferating technological interventions and biomedical advancements.

In the final chapter, Mills examines race, sex, gender, and disability as vectors that circumscribe the constitution of biopolitical subjects. Specifically, Mills contends that 'biopolitics made possible and gave rise to new forms of subjectivity', thus rendering some subjects valuable and desirable, and others 'illegitimate, socially unintelligible or otherwise unrecognisable and devalued' (Mills 2018, p. 158). To this end, Mills interrogates race, sex, gender, and disability as axes of biopolitical subjectivation through which 'life' is differentially valued within a biopolitical framework, whereby the lives of certain subjects are fostered, while others are disallowed to the point of death. Mills begins by considering theoretical approaches to subjectivity adopted by biopolitical theorists, including Foucault's conceptualisation of subjectivity as an effect of power, Agamben's account of subjectivation through language, and Esposito's consideration of personhood as a biopolitical *dispositif*. Mills argues that, notwithstanding Foucault's foregrounding of state racism and sexuality in his account of biopolitics, these approaches largely elide the question of how racism and sexism articulate in the formation of biopolitical subjects. Mills then considers recent interventions into biopolitical thought, including analyses of the articulation of biopolitics, colonialism, and racism by Mbembe, Stoler, and Weheliye, as well as Grosz' feminist rereading of Darwinian evolutionary theory which Mills suggests can be used to posit sexual difference as a mechanism of biopolitical regulation, in order to foreground the strategic deployment of racism and sexism in biopolitical regimes of 'making live' and 'letting die'. Thus, Mills concludes that 'processes of subjectivation are central to the biopolitical management

of life and its differential valuation; indeed, it might be that processes of subjectivation act as a principle means by which life is brought into politics' (Mills 2018, p. 175).

It is worth noting that while Catherine Mills' *Biopolitics* shares a number of underlying similarities to Lemke's (2011) introductory text on biopolitics, the two texts also diverge in several significant ways. Both Mills and Lemke offer thorough introductory overviews of theoretical approaches to biopolitics, including discussions of key theorists and their contributions to developments in biopolitical thought, and broad surveys of contemporary debates and issues in biopolitical studies. Both texts also maintain an interdisciplinary focus throughout their discussions. However, while Lemke traces the genealogy of the concept of biopolitics as it both precedes and follows Foucault's mobilisation of the term in *The History of Sexuality* and his subsequent lectures at the Collège de France, Mills focuses attention on what she refers to as a 'critical vein of biopolitical theory' (Mills 2018, p. 6) as it emerges in Foucault's work and subsequent contemporary theoretical approaches to biopolitics. Thus, while Lemke's text offers a thorough historical excavation of the concept of biopolitics prior to and following its articulation by Foucault, Mills' text effectively examines a wide array of recent theoretical and empirical studies in her discussion of contemporary approaches to biopolitics. It is also noteworthy that while both Mills and Lemke foreground the theoretical contributions of Foucault, Agamben, Hardt, Negri, and Esposito, among others, Mills includes the work of Hannah Arendt in her theoretical overview of biopolitics, while a sustained discussion of Arendt's contributions to biopolitical thought is notably absent in Lemke's text. Thus, while both texts offer excellent introductory discussions of biopolitics, they engage in these discussions with notably different methodological approaches and theoretical emphases. As a result, one text cannot be straightforwardly substituted for the other, insofar as they each make unique and significant contributions to advancements in biopolitical thought.

Mills identifies the diversity and interdisciplinarity of theoretical approaches to biopolitics, and writes that 'the mobility of the concept, and its breadth of application across the social sciences and humanities, means that it is not possible to provide an exhaustive analysis of the significant themes or points of disputation in the field' (Mills 2018, p. 6) within the constraints of a short introductory text (*Biopolitics* is 185 pages long). Thus, the scope and depth of Mills' discussion in *Biopolitics* is, at times, limited to a narrow consideration of foundational theoretical approaches to biopolitics due to the necessary structural constraints of an introductory text. As a result, although Mills considers a range of contemporary theoretical approaches to biopolitics, several new directions in biopolitical thought drawing on queer, critical race, and post/anti-colonial theories, including the important interventions of Chen (2012) and Puar (2007; 2015), are notably absent from Mills' discussion. Chen, for instance, deploys the concept of animacy as an 'often racialised and sexualised means of conceptual and affective mediation between human and

inhuman, animate and inanimate' (Chen 2012, p. 10) in order to disrupt the ontological stability of 'life' and 'death', and the associated regimes of 'making live' and 'letting die', in a critique of biopolitics that has important implications for queer and critical race theories, as well as posthumanist and new materialist thought. Puar (2007) similarly draws on queer and critical race theories to examine the articulation of sexuality, race, ethnicity, gender, class, and nation in the formation of biopolitical subjects, particularly in the context of counterterrorism and securitisation, in an important theoretical reworking of biopolitics. In this regard, several contemporary interventions into biopolitical thought, which offer productive extensions, critiques, and problematisations of the theoretical frameworks engaged by Mills, are notably excluded from *Biopolitics*. To this end, *Biopolitics* does not offer a comprehensive substitute for direct engagement with foundational texts written by theorists of biopolitics. Rather, as an introductory text, it can be productively read alongside these foundational theoretical works, insofar as it offers clear introductory explications of the central concepts and arguments advanced by biopolitical theorists.

Within the constraints of an introductory text, however, Mills offers a concise and accessible overview of theoretical approaches, debates, and issues in biopolitical studies that makes several significant contributions. Theoretically, *Biopolitics* provides a thorough overview of foundational theoretical approaches to biopolitics, including discussions of the contributions of influential theorists and contemporary debates in biopolitical thought, that is conceptually clear without sacrificing theoretical sophistication. Pedagogically, Mills' discussion is stylistically and communicatively clear and engaging, and thus offers an approachable introduction to biopolitics that is suitable for advanced undergraduate and graduate students, as well as instructors, particularly when used in conjunction with other texts written by biopolitical theorists. Critically, Mills engages in an analytics of biopolitics by examining the articulation of politics, life, and subjectivity as they are mobilised through biopolitical frameworks. Through foregrounding these biopolitical problematics, Mills maintains analytical rigour in her examination of the theoretical approaches to biopolitics considered throughout the text, and thus develops important critical insights into biopolitical thought. With *Biopolitics*, Mills thus offers a comprehensive introduction to theoretical approaches and contemporary debates in biopolitical studies that will be of interest to students and scholars of biopolitics due to its theoretical sophistication, pedagogical clarity, and critical interventions with regard to biopolitical thought.

**Jacob Vinje is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge, Canada, and editorial assistant for the Journal of Historical Sociology. His current research is concerned with theorising contemporary Canadian programs of anti-terrorism, counterterrorism, and securitisation as biopolitical techniques of governance.**

## References

Agamben, G 1998, *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life*, trans. D Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

Chen, MY 2012, *Animacies: biopolitics, racial mattering, and queer affect*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Foucault, M 2003, "*Society must be defended*": *lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, ed. M Bertani & A Fontana, trans. D Macey, Picador, New York.

———1978, *The history of sexuality, volume I: an introduction*, trans. R Hurley, Vintage Books, New York.

Lemke, T 2011, *Biopolitics: an advanced introduction*, New York University Press, New York.

Mbembe, A 2003, 'Necropolitics', trans. L Meintjes, *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 11-40.

Mills, C 2018, *Biopolitics*, Routledge, New York.

Puar, JK 2015, 'The 'right' to maim: disablement and inhumanist biopolitics in Palestine', *borderlands e-journal*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 1-27.

———2007, *Terrorist assemblages: homonationalism in queer times*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Rabinow, P & Rose, N 2006, 'Biopower today', *BioSocieties*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 195-217.