

# Biopolitics - An interview with Timothy Campbell

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BIOPOLITICS  
A READER

Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, editors

Biopolitics: A Reader Edited by  
Timothy Campbell and Adam  
Sitze

**Timothy Campbell** is a Professor of Italian in the Department of Romance Studies at Cornell University and together with Adam Sitze, a professor of Law, Jurisprudence and Social thought at the Amherst College he recently edited a new collection of essays on the topic of biopolitics. Campbell translated Roberto Esposito's *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minnesota, 2008) and *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* (Stanford, 2009). He is the author of *Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi* (Minnesota, 2006), winner of the Media Ecology Association's 2007 Lewis Mumford Award for Outstanding Scholarship in the Ecology of Technics and *Improper Life: Biopolitics and Technology from Heidegger to Agamben* (Minnesota, 2011). He also edits the series "Commonalities" for Fordham University Press and is currently completing his study of cinema and biopower titled *Grace Notes: Cinema and the Generous Form of Life*.

Biopolitics: A Reader published in 2013 collects pivotal texts defining the concept of biopolitics. Opening with Michel Foucault's coining of the term in his 1976 essay "Right of Death and Power over Life" we follow biopolitics through the edited collection as it is anticipated by Hannah Arendt and later altered, critiqued, deconstructed, and refined by major political and social theorists who explicitly engaged with Foucault's ideas.

*This blog post is abridged. A PDF of the entire interview is available [here](#).*

**Heather Dewey-Hagborg:** What is biopolitics? What was biopolitics (as in, where did the idea come

from) and what does biopolitics mean today?

**Timothy Campbell:** Ah, the million-dollar question. When Adam Sitze and I sat down five years ago to sketch the readings we would include in *Biopolitics: A Reader*, we struggled to find a definition that could cover most of the nuances of the term. I'm sure he would agree that if nothing else it was instructive trying to pin down the meaning of biopolitics.

Some of the difficulty is that defining biopolitics already limits where you think the term originates and what kind of work you want the term to do. And as we point out in the introduction, biopolitics is truly plastic: it morphs just as soon as you think you've got hold of it.

With that said, my preference is to focus on the "is" of your question. What is biopolitics? Clearly, it's a moment, as Arendt, Agamben, and Esposito among others argue, when what the Ancient Greeks called *bios*, or life, encounters the political, which is how they referred to life in the city or polis. This is important only because of the separation of life as *bios* from life as life in the polis: *bios* was domestic life, food, health, the household's budget. In short, it is the moment when life encounters the political, which is what Arendt sketches so profoundly and at length in *The Human Condition*, portions of which we include in the reader. Let's also remember that *politikos* did not include slaves nor women.

I want to insist on the word encounter when describing the meeting of life and politics because encounter highlights a relation that isn't — yet — a fusion. I continue to think it important to distinguish between life and politics; that finding an interval to hold open between them may provide us with an opportunity for thought that might otherwise go missing if we immediately assume we know the meaning of biopolitics or biopower. It's one of the principal lessons I took from Esposito's *Bios*: the way we speak about concepts absolutely matters.

And so to ask about the meaning of biopolitics is really to ask about what happens when life as biological life meets and is enmeshed with political life.

No longer is politics primarily about the citizen, political parties, democracy, monarchy, aristocracy, or voting but is increasingly concerned with the health, we might say the well-being, of the polis and its members. This explains today why when some speak of biopolitics, they have in mind the overall welfare of populations, their health, security, and all those facets with which we determine how a particular group is doing biologically, physically, and psychologically. Any politics that is addressed to maintaining the health and well-being, as well as to securing a population is no longer a politics as we generally understand it but is instead biopolitics.

As we write in the introduction, the terrain of biopolitics is contested and so before I go any further, let me add that many of my colleagues would dispute any reading that separates *bios* from *politikos* in antiquity. They were hardly as separate as the division as Arendt and others would have us believe. There is a powerful challenge to be sure. For my part I find it helpful to imagine a continuum between *bios* and *politikos*: on one side, the biological or the household, and on the other, the political. Moments, events, and decisions can be plotted accordingly.

Two last comments. Usually we don't add prefixes to politics or power. There is the important exception of geopolitics, which as Roberto Esposito shows in his fantastic chapter on the enigma of biopolitics in *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, was the handiwork of the Swede Rudolph Kjellén, who coined both terms. As helpful as that history is, practically speaking when we talk about politics, there's often no need for a prefix: we know exactly what it means. It's conflict, it's a game, or more simply "It's just politics," by which we refer to the daily irritations that come when working with others on pretty much anything. Politics is the cost that comes with working in and for institutions and of getting something to work. Politics is also shorthand for what doesn't work, as in Congress.

Biopolitics is not that politics.

You could never say, for instance, "You know, it's just biopolitics." And the reason you can't is because

biopolitics is a term that registers — radically in my view — a new situation, one in which politics is no longer simply about ideology or setting up a position according to who your friends and enemies are. Biopolitics says that politics today is about the life of human beings judged and evaluated according to their health or potential for health.

Securing a population's health over a territory as Michel Foucault might have said. Biopolitics, in other words, is a way of making sense of contemporary trends in politics. The irony is that doing so, the term also seriously undercuts how we generally understand politics.

Second, where before there were many perspectives on the political, today there appear to be a growing number of those of the biopolitical. In other words it's a hotly contested term. So contested that many of late are arguing that it has lost what little use value it may have enjoyed earlier. Others, like my friend Premesh Lalu at the University of the Western Cape, are making a counter-claim, arguing that rather than lessening it, we need to intensify the biopolitical critique. My own sense of where biopolitics squares with Lalu's. Biopolitics can help us make sense of developments that the political cannot, and it does so by acknowledging what we know experientially in our lives. As the political wanes and with it the meaning and power of terms like democracy, citizenry, and voting, biopolitics gives a name to those seismic changes to health, the human, and how power becomes increasingly devoted to biology, to life. That would explain a lot of the resistance to the term.

**HDH:** How does biopolitics intersect with people's everyday lives? (Why does it matter outside philosophy?) How might we use this concept as a tool?

**TC:** According to Foucault's reading of biopolitics that we locate in the introduction as the concept's near origin,

biopolitics intersects with the lives of people through what Foucault calls *dispositifs* or, as it is often translated in English, as apparatuses. Apparatus pretty much names whatever it is that makes some thing or some one **visible**.

Riffing off of Agamben's reading of apparatus in *What is an Apparatus?*, apparatus recalls, as Peter Goodrich makes clear in his wonderful essay, "[The Theater of Emblems](#)," the French, *appareils*, to make visible. I would also add that apparatus also names the tools we use to help us perform a task. The apparatus of the book, for example, is its headings, subheadings, footnotes, etc. Taken together, apparatus names both those mechanisms that make visible an object or a person (think the frame of a movie), and that which allows a task to be performed.

What are the apparatuses of biopolitics, or better, of biopower? There are as many as there are ways of making visible subjects, forms, objects, and sites so that biopower can be brought to bear on them. We could speak about the patent as an apparatus, certain technologies (cinema, social media), the person of course, and language itself: techniques, patterns, legal practices whose effect is to make us visible (as a friend on Facebook, as a consumer, as a speaker of a language, and lastly as guilty or innocent). Once made visible, other apparatuses begin to piggyback. A good example was Facebook's [attempt](#) to determine the effect that certain kinds of news feeds had on its users. It's the most obvious example but there are many others.

Why does any of this matter? It does because

the more we see how biopower works through apparatuses, the more we can decide for ourselves how much we want to contribute to our own visibility and at what price.

It's important to remind ourselves that people, let's call them plutocrats for short, own apparatuses and thus are utterly committed to using "their" apparatuses to harvest data in order to make as much profit as possible. If we know some of the disadvantages along with the advantages in becoming the object

of an apparatus, we may decide to create a new situation in which counter-apparatus become available.

My sense is that when it comes to apparatuses, what we're really talking about is destiny or fate. Too often though, this is no proper fate, but a *fait accompli*, as in we are utterly and completely destined to consume. Knowing the role apparatuses play may make our future less a *fait accompli* than it might otherwise be. We might even choose not to consume. Currently, apparatuses seem to be all about making commodities "appear" as inevitably one's own to the degree we consume them (the distinction between fate and *fait accompli* was one dear to the British psychologist, **D.W. Winnicott**). At the same time, it's hard not to be skeptical. Apparatuses, for as much as they make us visible, don't like the light.

To circle back to biopolitics and how we might use it, Adam and I have a bit of a go in our introduction at all of the inflation surrounding the prefix bio – biopolitics, biometrics, bioart, etc. With that said, biopolitics is different and that's because it is more easily translated into the terms of our daily life than the other terms. One way to translate biopolitics into a practice is to feel the body and to experience the effects of apparatuses on it during the day. Chances are quite good that if your pulse is up, if you've been sitting for hours, if your wrists hurt, and you feel pressure in your head, then you have been made the object of an apparatus. In that sense biopolitics isn't just what captures, but also what stimulates us to discover a sense of the body and what is happening at a specific moment. Biopolitics may well lead to a heightened practice of attention.

**HDH:** What are your thoughts about the recent attention given to the multi and varied programs of mass electronic surveillance, from government to corporate entities? What does biopolitics have to say about this? As our bodies progressively become viewed as data, what do you think it says for the future of biopolitics?

**TC:** There have been political responses to mass electronic surveillance, but that all have failed and that

they have failed precisely because the situation we're facing isn't primarily political but biopolitical.

As long as we try to formulate a political response, we're back to *fait accompli* and tragedy. Maybe it's my American optimism, but I prefer my biopolitics to be comic. And so one response might be to play with surveillance and with the mining of data, so that eventually what the apparatuses capture cannot be said to "belong" to me.

To do that a first step would be to start asking about what surveillance harkens back to. Here what lingers for me is the word collection; the collection of data, stolen data to be sure, but collection nonetheless.

What would a collection look like if the data gathered about you isn't yours per se?

I can hear the objections; that in order to play there must have been a previous moment in which you have accepted the reality of data collection. But accepting it as reality, doesn't mean giving in to it. And that moment of acceptance that isn't acquiescence hasn't happened yet. The comic as **Kenneth Burke** knew so well was accepting but not acquiescing.

Instead the political response has been collective outrage. Outrage never lasts and so what we need is less identification with it. Yes, there needs to be a legal response, and Snowden is absolutely a *bona fides* hero to me, but in terms of everyday life, I'm more concerned about the surveillance mechanisms that each of us employ on ourselves every day. Maybe what needs to happen is to re-inscribe surveillance in a different register. There's a long history in the 20th century of the avant-garde employing art as a way of accessing their unconscious. The result often enough was that they become less available for the apparatuses of the day. Or think about how Lacan played with radio and

television in his interviews. My point is simply that the collection of personal data would be so much less important if we were to give the proper weight to the unconscious and fantasy.

For the most part, biopolitics has been understood as the taking of life or letting live in Foucault's formulation, but as long as we take that as the alpha and omega of biopolitics, then the critique that biopolitics offers can only go so far. We need a more incisive understanding of biopolitics for today. In his later work on the care of the self, the Cynics, and fearless speech, Foucault began to sketch what that might look like.

If biopolitics fundamentally involves the appropriation, ownership, and the mastery of data, but also of ourselves and our bodies, then anything that subverts mastery deserves serious consideration as a response.

I want to insist here on the importance of the term, mastery. Mastery has become an important term for me recently. Essentially, it involves the possession of a body, be it of another human being or beings or of knowledge. It's the latter usage that I'm interested in. One is an expert in surgery or an expert in languages. But with the proliferation of apparatuses, the notion of master and mastery has changed. The master is a master thanks to the repetition that he or she is willing to undertake so that mastery will often be measured in the number of repetitions. The master is the priest of repetition. The result is to confuse insight and mastery or for that matter creativity and mastery.

If I can circle back to your earlier question about knowledge and power, I would say that to the degree mastery is once again in the air, it is because it names precisely the site where power, knowledge, and bodies come together. The master is he or she who is able to bring knowledge to bear on a body or bodies and in the act of bringing that knowledge as his or her own, the master exerts power. It's the form of bringing that interests me and here I've found it helpful to think about the act of carrying as involving a relation of the self or form of life or subject to the hand; to the grip that a master may be said to employ. In an astonishing essay titled "The Grip," Lyotard describes the master in Roman antiquity as he or she who grips the hand of the slave and the slave as he or she who is gripped or held. The notion of mastery today includes the grip and the severe, strenuous holding that characterizes so much of our contemporary life. Holding on to an idea, an identity, what one has learned, what one has lived — in some sense we all hope to master our past thanks to these apparatuses so as to hold our future. But mastery across bodies, disciplines, climates, and art is often about one thing only: the mastery of uncertainty, as paradoxical as that may sound.

In lieu of mastery or alongside there is play and true creativity (not the B-School stuff that wants to pass it itself off as creativity). What is needed is getting in touch again with the role of the unconscious and fantasy. To do that

we need to find a way to identify less with the data as what we are; perhaps we might even allow ourselves to be dispossessed of the data.

What happens then? I don't know, but so much of what we think matters to us is increasingly shown to be about mastery. I'd like to take a pause when it comes to that.

You might ask wonder what dispossession looks like. If possession and mastery involve degrees of holding, with on one side a tight grip and on the other, the open hand, then dispossession marks the progressive relaxing of the grip. I've been working a lot recently on these questions as they relate to the cinematic apparatus, particularly to the films of Michelangelo Antonioni. Without wanting to overstate the case, dispossession is in on display to varying degrees across all his films, but especially in his three films from the early 1960s: *L'avventura*, *La notte*, and especially *L'eclisse*. If those films are about one thing and one thing only, it would be the relation between learning to hold or grasp or grip differently and the kind of life we live. I would go further and say that Antonioni is attempting there to push the spectator to a kind of visual dispossession of what she sees on film.

**HDH:** Can you expand on what you mean about the role of the unconscious and fantasy in creating a biopolitically subversive art form? And/or more generally what role you might see for art in this context ie. creating public awareness, alternate narratives, moments of rupture...?

**TC:** One of my fears about biopower is the seeming ease with which it limits the unconscious and fantasy and their possible response. The disappearance of the unconscious was already registered in Foucault's *\*History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction\**, save for when the subject's unconscious "deploys itself" in the discourse of sex. After that sexuality essentially is seen as what contains the unconscious. Its disappearance continues in many reflections on biopolitics that have appeared since then, where potential often seems to occupy the space that formerly belonged to the unconscious. The result in my view has been a lack of depth when considering the subjects of "the discourse of sex", and, not coincidentally, an easier road to mastery. It's as if what Bergson called the "mechanistic instinct of the mind" has trumped the unconscious and fantasy. Continuing to paraphrase Bergson's marvelous pages on the "metaphysician within us,"

biopower has given us fixed requirements, ready-made explanations, and irreducible propositions.

Today we believe we are giving space to our fantasies every time we go online or use an app, which makes sense given how many different ways apparatuses allow us to relate to one another and to the world. In an earlier period we would have spoken of different masks for different occasions. Today we have different identities for different apparatuses and the effect hasn't always been welcome since masks and identifications are not the same. The mask is a usable object that negates, but it negates less than identification does. My fear is that we are witnessing a loss of freedom to affirm a form of life in the move from mask to identity. Said differently: we hold on to identifications more tightly than we do to masks.

If this is the situation we face, then

what would a biopolitically subversive art form look like? It seems to me that it would encompass works that subvert biological identification and identity at the level of species and genus. It would involve artists who are willing and able to suspend their possession of what they have created either for themselves and for others.

This would be art in which precariousness is foregrounded: the precariousness of play across political and biological forms, where the political and biological rock back and forth between the subjective and the objective. What does a subjective view of biology look like? How does it change if we adopt a traditionally political perspective on it? Where do they intersect?

To take the example of the cover to the Reader, Jane Alexander's *Butcher Boys*, the installation is biologically motivated to the degree that gendered forms of life are put on display. These 'boys' though appear to inhabit a zone of indistinguishability one from another and from other animals that we might recognize and name. A political perspective would in turn highlight the danger of what we see — these are not friends, but enemies who threaten us. These are animals politicized as enemies and enemies biologized as animals. Not coincidentally, Adam and I in the Reader focus much of our attention on the trope of chiasmus. Not surprisingly it's at the heart of what I consider a biopolitical practice, be it aesthetic or otherwise.

**HDH:** In the introduction to the Biopolitics reader you say "not enough time has passed for a complete accounting of biopolitics, biopower, and for their possible genealogies and archaeologies to have been written." Beyond your own text, who else is working on this project? What references would you recommend?

**TC:** There is so much fantastic work being written right now. Italy continues in my mind to be the place for some of the most innovative, only because the political came to end there ten years ago. A whole



new generation of scholars are writing in the wake of Agamben, Esposito, and Negri. I mentioned Davide Tarizzo's *Life, A Recent Invention*, and then there this Simona Forti's wonderful *The New Demons*, which is just out from Stanford (her essay "*The Biopolitics of Souls*" is a tour de force). Staying in Italy, I would also be on the lookout for translations of work by the likes of Ida Dominijanni, Elettra Stimili, and Dario Gentile. More translations of Esposito's work are appearing in 2015. Of special interest is *Categories of the Impolitical* in Connal Parsley's elegant translation along with Two, Esposito's response to all the political theologians among us. As I say, Italy continues to be at the center of debates surrounding biopolitics. If your readers can't wait, there was a conference awhile back at Cornell, where I teach. I just discovered that many of the papers and videos from the conference are still up. You can find them [here](#).

Germany too was an important site for work on biopolitics. Lemke, Casper and Moore's *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* is definitely a great place to go after *Biopolitics: A Reader*. And I certainly want to urge everyone to track down Peter Sloterdijk's brilliant and problematic essay, "*Rules for the Human Zoo*," which finally appeared in translation in *EPD: Society and Space* three years ago.

Closer to home, there's a terrific volume of new work on biopolitics that's appearing shortly from the University of Chicago Press. Titled *Biopower: Michel Foucault and Beyond*, the editors, Nicolae Morar and Vernon Cisney, have assembled a great volume of new thinking around biopolitics. Melinda Cooper's work *Life as Surplus* is a truly great work that merits the widest possible readership. Cary Wolfe, the editor of the *Posthumanities* series at the University of Minnesota Press, has written important and penetrating essays on biopolitics and animal studies. I would also keep my eye out for a funny and adventurous read that's forthcoming from Stanford: Jeffrey T. Nealon's *Plant Theory*.