

Violence Beyond the Categories of Life and Death

Thijs Willaert

Abstract:

Debrix and Barder's *Beyond Biopolitics* constitutes an attempt to comprehend forms of violence that escape the current biopolitical paradigm. In proposing the concept of 'agonal sovereignty,' the authors seek to sketch the contours of a particular formation of power that not only supersedes the questions of life and death, but also actively works to undo the distinction between them by inflicting violence upon the already dead body. Although the book's theoretical approach does not seem attuned to local and historical differences, it raises useful questions about both the potential and the limitations of the concept of biopolitics.

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Violence Beyond the Categories of Life and Death

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Although *Beyond Biopolitics* contains only 170 pages, it certainly does not lack in scope and ambition. As the title indicates, Debrix and Barder have found the biopolitical paradigm to be insufficiently equipped for an analysis of violence and horror in world politics. In order to drive home this point, they visit a host of intellectual stars, including but not limited to Foucault, Kristeva, Deleuze & Guattari, Schmitt, Agamben, Hardt & Negri, Arendt, Girard, Butler, Bataille, Baudrillard, and Žižek. But does this also lead somewhere?

Debrix and Barder's main thesis can be grasped most clearly through their description of drug-related violence in Mexico. One week after a certain Hugo Hernandez had gone missing, body parts surfaced in different locations, until finally his face was found sewn to a soccer ball. Given that such violence can be exercised upon an already dead body, it cannot be understood entirely in terms of the popular concept of biopolitics: the chopping up of the already dead body constitutes an act of violence that is not invested in the optimization of certain lives at the expense of others, but rather in the pulverization of the embodiment of these very categories.

Beyond Biopolitics develops this thesis through four main chapters. In the first of these, Debrix and Barder introduce the concept of 'agonal sovereignty' in order to capture this specific form of horrific violence. They then move on to discuss the role of fear in the economy of power that allows for agonal sovereignty, stressing that fear must be produced and reproduced in order for power to maintain and extend its grip on the social body. The third chapter subsequently sets out to explore the question of generalized fear as it relates to generalized violence. Modifying the by now common idea of geopolitical spaces of exception, they emphasize the virtuality of the suspension of the law: the state of exception that allows for the exercise of a violent agonal sovereignty can be actualized anywhere and at any time. Finally, a last chapter connects this virtual omnipresence of agonal violence to a new conceptualization of enmity. In this age of global virtual exception, the enemy as Other is no longer represented in terms of location, identity, or humanity, but is depicted as a virtual, faceless presence aimed at the destruction of humanity.

Suggestive though this notion of agonal sovereignty may be, the reader is sometimes left to wonder where exactly the virtuality of the state of exception is actualized, and the horrific

violence Debrix and Barder theorize is to be found, besides in the violent death-worlds of the Mexican cartels. Although *Beyond Biopolitics* promises to relate its theoretical explorations to "currently salient issues and topics" (p. 24), it rarely ventures any further than some predictable references to Guantanamo Bay. In those few instances where Debrix and Barder reach out to less obvious manifestations of violence, as with the predicament of the Kurds in Turkish society (p. 73), their discussion fails to elaborate on what it is exactly that binds these divergent examples together. If the concept of agonal sovereignty was coined to diagnose a set of power relations particularly prominent in our contemporary age, surely the mere positing of "a generalized context of global agonal war and violence onto the human and human dignity" (p. 93) without sufficient illustration amounts to yet another homogenization and obfuscation of difference. Through this notion of a global virtuality, Debrix and Barder not only ignore the question of why certain subjects are more likely to fall victim to horrific violence than others, they also mimic the rhetoric of the global War on Terror that reproduces such difference in the first place.

With these caveats in mind, *Beyond Biopolitics* presents a forceful invitation to analyse the tactics and strategies of power working on the body beyond the biopolitical categories of life and death. The claim that the biopolitical categories of life and death are not as all-encompassing as they seem and that death is no longer the limit of power opens up a space of inquiry that not only goes beyond biopolitics, but also begs the question of the extent to which critiques of biopolitics have remained caught up in the categories power defined.