

A Comparative Study of Contemporary Italian Biopolitics

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a heated discussion on biopolitics, among which the thought of biopolitics in Italy has exerted the greatest influence. Negri, Agamben and Esposito, the three most famous thinkers of biopolitics in contemporary Italy, created three different forms of biopolitics on the basis of their predecessors' theories. Through comparison, it is found that although there are significant differences in the basic concepts and connotations of the three types of biopolitical thoughts, they all reflect the concern for the body. From a more macroscopic perspective, the Italian life political thought also reflects the "body turn" in the development of contemporary Western philosophy.

Keywords

Italy; biopolitics; Negri; Agamben; Esposito.

1. Introduction

The outbreak of Covid-19 has triggered a heated discussion on biopolitics in domestic academic circles. Since the outbreak of Covid-19, domestic academic circles have carried out intense discussions and in-depth reflections on various phenomena in Covid-19. On the one hand, various academic seminars of different sizes have been held one after another, among which the seminar themed on biopolitics and Covid-19 has attracted more attention. This is because many phenomena in the epidemic can be brought into the discussion and research field of biopolitics. On the other hand, the outbreak of Covid-19 has focused the attention of the Chinese people on Italy. The mutual assistance between China and Italy in the face of the epidemic has set a good example for the exchanges between countries in different cultural backgrounds. When we talk about the biopolitics, Italy comes into our view again, because some of the most influential thinkers in the field of contemporary biopolitics, such as Negri, Agamben and Esposito, are from Italy. At present, there are mainly three forms of biopolitics in Italy, namely productive biopolitics initiated by Negri, negative biopolitics initiated by Agamben and immune biopolitics proposed by Esposito. The rise of biopolitics in the western academic circle also promoted the contemporary revitalization of Italian philosophy.

2. Foucault and the Birth of Biopolitics

Foucault indisputably is considered the founder of modern biopolitics. He pointed out in the college teaching courses in France the end of the 18th century in the modern state of the change of management technology, from the individual body as object, discipline and punishment as a means of governance to population as the object, in order to control the population safety and health as the means of governance. This is the liberal art of governance. He defines biopolitics as "a new technology of power"[1]. After Foucault initiated the discussion on biopolitics, the

tradition of biopolitics has not been continued in France, but has been continued and developed in Italy, and has exerted a extensive influence in the western academic circle. Some scholars even believe that the Western academic circle is ushering in the "biopolitical turn".

3. Three Kinds of Biopolitics in Italy

3.1. Negri and the Productive Biopolitics

As an influential contemporary political philosopher, Negri was early involved in political movements, and after he was arrested and released from prison, he began to write theories. He put forward a productive theory of biopolitics in the context of Italian Autonomist Marxism. The empire trilogy co-authored by Negri and Hart, an American scholar, aroused a warm response in the western academic circle. Slavoj Žižek, the famous left-wing thinker, even believed that *Empire* rewrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* to some extent. The formation of his biopolitical thought was influenced by the unique Autonomist Marxism of Italy, which attached great importance to Marx's *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858*, namely the *Grundrisse*, in the genealogy of Marx's thoughts. The concepts of "general intelligence" and "immaterial labor" mentioned by Marx in the *Grundrisse* were endowed with new connotations by Negri, in combination with the current reality of capitalist production.

For Negri and Hart, the global expansion of contemporary capitalism has resulted in a system of power that he calls an "empire," which, unlike imperialism, is not a powerful capitalist state but a mobile, decentralized, global network. Although this empire maintained the domination of developed capitalist countries over developing countries, it was full of tension and contradictions due to internal differences and changes in the balance of power, which indicated the collapse of the imperial system and the birth of a new world system. In *Empire*, therefore, Negri and Hart did not merely describe the dominant system, but prepared themselves theoretically to transcend it. They put their hope to resist capitalism and transcend empire on immaterial labor production, that is, the production of biopolitics[2]. Immaterial labor produces not only immaterial labor products, such as symbols, information and images, but also a kind of commonality produced by workers cooperating with each other. As a result, the production of biopolitics has shifted the focus of the economy from the production of material goods to the production of social relations, and production and reproduction have become increasingly confused[3]. Therefore, immaterial labor produces the subject of social relations as well as the object of production, which is a kind of political production involving life. Therefore, Negri and Hart call this kind of production biopolitical production. After the traditional proletariat gradually retreated to the historical stage as the subject of the revolution, Marxist theorists were trying to find a new revolutionary subject. Negri and Hart believe that through the production of biopolitics, a new revolutionary subject, the multitude, is being created. The multitude have accumulated rich knowledge, technology and experience through immaterial labor production, and the common wealth they produced also contains the element of communism. Different from the traditional proletariat, in the eyes of Negri and Hart, the multitude are the spontaneous revolutionary subjects. Since the non-material labor production is not restricted by the capitalist material means of production, the multitude have a high degree of autonomy and the ability to get rid of the domination of capital. They could rebel against capitalist rule by "walking out" and refusing to work, and seize back from the capitalists the common wealth they had produced, thus giving them a chance to move towards communism. Negri's thought of biopolitics has undoubtedly opened up a new horizon for fighting against capitalism under the background of globalization.

3.2. Agamben and Negative Biopolitics

Agamben, the contemporary Italian philosopher active in European academic circle, succeeded Foucault's tradition of biopolitics and initiated a different path of negative biopolitics under the influence of Heidegger and Benjamin's thoughts. In his *Homo Sacer* series, Agamben systematically explains his biopolitical thought. He believed that biopolitics existed at the beginning of politics, rather than the product of modern society. He found in the ancient Roman society a special existence of the individual - the Homo Sacer, the Homo Sacer is special in that he can be killed but not sacrificed. Being able to be killed means that he is excluded from the secular laws, not being sacrificed means that he is excluded from the sacred religions, and this double exclusion is the most essential characteristic of the Homo Sacer. The life of Homo Sacer is a pure biological existence of naked life, deprived of human rights and obligations, is the highest power can be arbitrarily disposed of object. The naked life is the life of the Homo Sacer, who can be killed but not sacrificed [4]. Agamben's view of supreme power inherits Benjamin's thoughts on law and violence. Benjamin believed that law is embodied in two forms of violence, namely, violence of legislation and violence of law enforcement.

In the view of Agamben, the sovereign suspends the law by declaring the state of exception, stripping the various external forms of life, and reducing life to the naked life of pure biological existence [5]. The nakedness of life is the violence of law enforcement. This process is also the sanctification of life, the process of the individual into the Homo Sacer, in the view of Agamben this process is the biopolitics. The Homo Sacer did not disappear into history, but continued into the modern era with the biopolitics. In Nazi concentration camps, Jew waiting to be slaughtered are the embodiment of the modern Homo Sacer, and their lives transformed into bare lives that can be slaughtered at will. Agamben believes that biopolitics did not disappear with the demise of the Nazis, but deeply embedded in modern political life. The universalization and normalization of exceptional status make everyone a potential Homo Sacer, the most obvious example of which is the anti-terrorism measures implemented by the United States after 9/11. As long as the United States is designated as a terrorist, the United States can bypass international and domestic laws and human rights regulations to carry out military strikes and brutal abuses against specific individuals and organizations. Here in Agamben, the biopolitics has become a kind of life-destroying death politics, which has only a negative meaning. He expected a messianic sort of "coming community" that would suddenly break down the mechanisms that sustain the biopolitics. His critics see this biopolitics as eschatological, and his solutions as fanciful and impractical.

3.3. Esposito and Immune Biopolitics

As a rising star in the field of contemporary life politics, Roberto Esposito combines life philosophy and technology philosophy to reshape biopolitics and construct a positive biopolitics based on immune paradigm. His thoughts on biopolitics are elucidated in *Life: Politics and Philosophy of Life* and *Immunity: the Protection and Negation of Life*. He understood biopolitics as the interaction between life and politics. Politics exists to protect life, but it often protects life in the form of denying life, which is what he called the immune mechanism. Esposito also disagrees with Foucault about the origin of the politics of life, which, in his view, existed early in human civilization. In ancient Greece, the Spartan city-states abandoned deformed babies that could not be bred into warriors. In the *Republic*, Plato advocated that the method of breeding livestock should be applied to the citizens of the city-states to improve the quality of citizens. These behaviors all embody the meaning of life politics.

Esposito applied the immune mechanism in biomedicine to the analysis in the political field, and believed that this mechanism was universal in human society. The immunity in biomedicine is to introduce the harmful pathogen into the human body to induce the human body to produce antibody, so as to eliminate the virus and prevent the virus, and maintain the

human body's health and life survival. Various political systems of human society also actively incorporate negative factors out of the need of self-preservation, Hobbes' *Leviathan* is the most obvious example. In order to avoid killing each other in the state of nature, people made contracts to give away some of their power, and the Leviathan became a monster of terrible power, and the state was born. It is the result of using an artificial negative force against the negative force of the state of nature. Under the Nazi rule, such a biopolitics, which preserved itself by the negative power, developed to its peak. Biopolitics changed into thanatopolitics, which also led to the destruction of the Nazis themselves. Esposito's thought of biopolitics is based on the deconstruction of Nazi thanatopolitics. He believes that the birth of thanatopolitics is due to the immune mechanism of biopolitics, which leads to the closure of the political body itself. The negative power of immunity loses the difference between internal and external forces and enemy forces, and finally turns to destroy itself. Influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy of life, he reinterprets the relationship between life and politics. Nietzsche regards life as the will to power, which means that life is a constantly expanding force beyond itself. Therefore, Esposito believes that politics as the norm of life should also be an open system, constantly adjusting itself to adapt to the movement of life. Politics should not be the external structure and device of life, but should become the internal norm of life. The norm here is no longer the right and duty from outside the subject, as in modern empiricism -- permitted and forbidden to be permitted -- but an internal form, that is, the power of life to express its own existence and not to be restricted [6]. Esposito's thought of life politics is also influenced by his thought of technology philosophy, which is embodied in his opinion of attaching importance to the body. He believes that the human body is essentially technological, and with the development of science and technology, the natural attributes of the body are constantly reduced and the technical attributes are constantly enhanced. In modern society, the development of organ transplantation, human enhancement, artificial tissue and other technologies makes the body gradually become an open channel and platform. Esposito believed that the body has become a carrier connecting people and objects in the contemporary era, through which people and objects can transform each other, which also provides a realistic foundation for the realization of life potential [7]. His biopolitical thought has the obvious post-human meaning, pays attention to the relationship between the development of technology and the new way of human existence, and provides a new way of thinking for the contemporary subject theory.

4. Discussion

By sorting out the three main forms of biopolitics existing in contemporary Italy, we can find that there is no obvious correlation among these different ideas and propositions on the surface. In terms of the understanding of the concept and connotation of biopolitics, as well as the expectation of the development of biopolitics, Negri, Agamben and Esposito differ greatly. In general, Negri regarded biopolitics as a revolutionary main production mode against capitalism, and he held a positive attitude towards biopolitics and its development. But Agamben, who associated biopolitics with the exceptional state, bare life with the *Homo Sacer*, had a negative attitude towards biopolitics. He understood life politics as a form of political terror dominated by sovereignty and deprived of the existence of life. Esposito's biopolitical thought is more like the synthesis of Negri and Agamben to a large extent, because his immune life politics has the dual function of protecting and denying life, and there is a dialectical relationship between politics and life. Esposito's main theoretical proposition is still closer to that of Negri, that is, he looks forward to a kind of affirmative biopolitics, which, to some extent, is a response and adaptation to Agamben's completely negative biopolitics.

Through further comparative analysis, it can be found that the three theoretical paths of biopolitics are intertwined to some extent. Negri, Agamben and Esposito all attach great

importance to the role of the body in the biopolitics. Negri emphasized that class struggle should be combined with racial politics and gender struggle to fight against capitalist rule, and race and gender are often reflected through the body of individuals. And Agamben's criticism of the emergence of bare life actually reveals that life has lost all external forms, leaving only the purely biological body. In Esposito, the body plays an even more crucial central role, not only as the place where immune mechanisms operate but also as the infrastructure for realizing the potential of life. The three thinkers agree on the attention to the body, which also reflects the "body turn" in contemporary Western philosophy.

5. Conclusion

The three different forms of biopolitics in contemporary Italy promote the contemporary development of biopolitics, and also make Italian philosophy attracted unprecedented attention again. Negri, Agamben and Esposito, three contemporary Italian philosophers, have created different forms of biopolitics and provided different analytical perspectives for understanding the political phenomena in today's world. If viewed from a more macroscopic perspective, these three different biopolitical thoughts reflect the development trend and direction of contemporary Western philosophy.

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