

S.J. Murray, "Thanatopolitics,"
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Thanatopolitics

Thanatopolitics—a politics of death—stands in opposition to biopolitics and its affirmative instantiations of "life itself"; it is the resistant and rhetorical counterpart to the dialectics and reductive ontologies of biopolitical life. In Michel Foucault's work, since the nineteenth-century biopolitics progressively displaced the sovereign's power "to take life or let live." Operating through multiplex neoliberal networks, biopolitics today is the postsovereign state power "to make live and let die," which seizes on the life of the population as its means and its end, its object and objective. Thanatopolitics would contest the ontologization of life and the powers that "make live," which disavow the corollary power that "lets die" in the name of life.

If biopolitics is a productive power that necessitates or silently calls for death as the consequence of "making live," then thanatopolitics is not merely the lethal underside

of biopolitics but is itself a productive power in the voices of those who biopolitical power "lets die." Thanatopolitics asks: how might those deaths—collateral damages, negative externalities, opportunity costs—productively disaffirm the regime of a neoliberal biopolitics that condemns to death? How might those deaths rise up, and haunt, the spaces of biopolitical production, to critically disaffirm the ways in which biopolitics not only occasions but also tolerates a certain threshold of death as its *modus operandi*? Such a perspective would call into question the implicit decisions, and covert cultivation of death, in the biopolitical logics that determine and distinguish those who are worthy of life, those who shall be made to live, from those who are permitted to perish.

In concrete terms, thanatopolitics might imagine the ways in which the actions of the suicide bomber are rhetorically productive, and make a claim, striking at the heart of neoliberal capital and technologies; but at the same time, it would honor the voices of Western soldiers who commit suicide, and would refuse to dismiss these deaths as a consequence of "pre-existing" mental health conditions, substance abuse, or "failed relationships," as the Pentagon has done. Indeed, soldier suicides oftentimes offer a critique of the neoliberal biopolitical regime in whose name they have served, and which in the end has proven unlivable, as many soldier suicide notes attest.

Such a perspective might, as well, consider the willingness to die of hunger-striking inmates held in the inhuman conditions of prolonged solitary confinement, and it might hear in this willingness not simply a loss of hope but rather a hope that is steadfast for more humane forms of treatment. In these cases, the biopolitical state often intervenes to keep inmates alive, through forced-feeding and other measures, against their will and despite legally binding Do No Resuscitate

orders. Here, what is intolerable to the state is less the living, who can be administrated, but the dead, whose posthumous claim threaten to disrupt the system.

Reckoning with the dead, then, is the effort to account for our own complicity in a regime that delivers death to some in the name of prosperity and life for others. Thanatopolitics would expose the fault-lines of biopolitical logics. It would attend to the rhetorical conditions in which the dead, the dying, and the dispossessed might rise up and speak. This is not to exalt suicide or other violent forms of biopolitical death, but to better understand the force of these events and to demonstrate how the biopolitical conception of life is deeply duplicitous, and ultimately represents a failed, illegible, and hypocritical form of ethical and political life.

(See also Agamben, Giorgio; Bare Life; Biopolitics; Capacity; Chapter 15, Biopower and Biopolitics; Chapter 23, Materialisms; Control; Cyborg; Foucault, Michel; and Labor)

Stuart J. Murray, *Carleton University (Canada)*

Further Reading

- Bargu, Banu. *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Esposito, Roberto. *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Murray, Stuart J. "Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life." *Polygraph: An International Journal of Politics and Culture* 18 (2006): 191–215.
- Murray, Stuart J. "Thanatopolitics: Reading in Agamben a Rejoinder to Biopolitical Life." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5.2 (2008): 203–07.