

***Porous Bodies:***

***Environmental Biopower and the Politics of Life in Ancient Rome***

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***Abstract***

*The case for an unprecedented penetration of life mechanisms into the politics of Western modernity has been a cornerstone of twentieth-century social theory. Working with and beyond Foucault, this article challenges established views about the history of biopower by focusing on ancient medical writings and practices of corporeal permeability. Through an analysis of three Roman institutions: a) bathing; b) urban architecture; and c) the military, it shows that technologies aimed at fostering and regulating life did exist in Classical antiquity at the population scale. The article highlights zones of indistinction between natural and political processes, *zoē* and *bíos*, that are not captured by a view of destructive incorporation of or over life by sovereign power. In conclusion, the article discusses the theoretical potential of this historical evidence for contemporary debates on ‘affirmative biopolitics’ and ‘environmental biopower’.*

***Keywords: Biopolitics, Classical Antiquity, Medicine, Health, Foucault, Agamben,***

***Esposito***

The case for an unprecedented penetration of life mechanisms into the politics of Western modernity has been a cornerstone of twentieth-century social theory. In an oft-repeated sentence Foucault wrote in 1976 that

*For millennia*, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question (transl. 1978: 143; my italics).

The notion of a peculiar modernity of biopolitics was far from being only Foucault's concern at the time. Two decades before him, Hannah Arendt understood the pathologies of modern power as the result of an increasing colonization of public life by biological processes (1958). This represented a break from Classical politics: a decisive feature of Greco-Roman antiquity, Arendt claims, is that it did establish a clear boundary between the management of biological processes (the household) and the realm of "human affairs", where the highest political capacities could be exerted (1958: 13, 38). Giorgio Agamben's work originally aimed to complicate this ancient-modern distinction by arguing that *bare life* (an originally Benjaminean term to describe existence as reduced to biological mechanisms) is the concealed nucleus of sovereign power from the very beginning of Western politics (1998). However, Agamben's hypothesis, while very effective for reading contemporary forms of the state of exception, has not really opened up an area of investigation on ancient biopower. Not only with his ahistorical method does Agamben fail to explore in any detail the mechanisms of ancient practices or institutions (leaving us with some scant references to Roman law and its obscure figure of the *homo sacer*) but he reinforces the notion that for the Greeks and the Romans "simple natural life is excluded from the polis in the strict sense" (1998: 2). Once again, a truly "irreducible indistinction" between basic vital mechanisms and politics has occurred only with modern democracy (1998: 10).

These initial comments are not aimed to offer a caricatured view of these three towering figures of European social theory. Rather, the purpose is to open up the question of a supposed biopolitical exceptionality of Western modernity by showing tensions in each of these authors and within this body of scholarship. It is fair to recognize for instance that Arendt's thought can be used to problematize this exclusion of biology from the realm of politics through concepts such as natality (Braun, 2007; Vatter, 2014). In his conclusive instalment of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben has loosened the hard demarcation of biological and political life in Antiquity (2015, particularly 5.3; van der Heiden 2019). However, I will focus mostly on Foucault here for three main reasons. Firstly because, particularly in his later work, Foucault offers the best resources to problematize "epochal and totalizing claims about the characteristic forms of power in modernity" (Collier, 2009: 88). Secondly, because this article follows a Foucauldian attention to mundane details and non-philosophical sources (rather than a merely conceptual approach) that are an important asset in the history of biopower. Thirdly, because this article deals with historical materials that overlap with some of the sources in Foucault's two volumes on Pagan Antiquity (1985, 1990), and given that my interpretation of this material is somewhat divergent, a focus on Foucault's work may more easily highlight what is at stake with this alternative reading.

*City-citizen vs shepherd-flock game: Foucault's demarcation strategy*

Starting with his 1977-1978 lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault introduced not only a shift in topics but also in methods and diagnostics, where the sequential succession of models of power (sovereignty then biopower or governmentality in a sort of teleological mode) was replaced by a *topological view* in which the whole repertoire of power technologies is "re-deployed and recombined in diverse assemblies of biopolitical

government” (Collier, 2009: 89). As Foucault argued programmatically at the beginning of *Security, Territory, Population* (STP):

There is not a series of successive elements, *the appearance of the new causing the earlier ones to disappear*. There is not the legal age, the disciplinary age, and then the age of security. Mechanisms of security do not replace disciplinary mechanisms, which would have replaced juridico-legal mechanisms (...) (2007: 8, my italics)

Genealogical suspiciousness may have led Foucault to dismiss earlier epochal claims in favour “a system of correlation” between different power mechanisms (2007: 8).

However, even in these later courses, this topological method sometimes clashes with what one can call here Foucault’s persisting demarcation strategy (borrowing from the sociology of knowledge: Gieryn, 1993). On one side Foucault is well aware that there is a longer history of disciplinary methods, from armies to workshops and monasteries and that Greco-Roman models of power acted as a model for later power technologies: it is the case of the Roman military *castrum* for the French Enlightenment (1977: 146) or the grotesque Roman model of “vile sovereignty” for modern bureaucrats and experts discussed in *Abnormal* (2003: 12). On the other side, however, genealogical emphasis remains in tension with Foucault’s boundary-work. For instance when discussing Middle-Age plague regulations in STP, Foucault emphasizes four times that premodern forms of public health are based on a logic of mere exclusion and hence, compared to modern medical campaigns, “give a *completely* different impression, act in a *completely* differently way, have a *completely* different end, and above all use *completely* different instruments” (2007: 294, my italics). But at the level of contents it is in lecture Five (February 8, 1978: 2007: 161 and ff.) that a demarcation strategy reaches its climax when Foucault argues for the absence from the Greco-Roman world of metaphors of pastoral care, developed instead in the Mediterranean East (Egypt, Assyria, Mesopotamia, the Hebrews) and subsequently “intensified” into later

models of governmentality (2007: 231). This demarcation between political power *over the city* (Pagan Antiquity) and power *over men* (the Eastern Judeo-Christian tradition) is pretty hard. As Foucault says rather bluntly “the structures of the Greek city-state and the Roman Empire were entirely foreign to a pastoral type of power” (2007: 129); and a few pages before: “the idea of governing people is *certainly not a Greek idea*, and *nor do I think it is a Roman idea*” (2007: 122, my italics).

It is fair to recognize that Foucault was unhappy with these formulations, and in wrapping up his lectures (February 22), he admits that it would be too much to claim there

“was a Greek or Greco-Roman world on one side that was entirely unaware of the pastor theme and the pastoral form of directing men” (2007: 221).

It is a fact, however, that Foucault’s double investigation of Pagan antiquity (*The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*), which appeared in French six years later, bears no trace of technologies of population control or biopolitical discussions. While the connection between government of the self and of others in these volumes is obviously complex and repeatedly emphasized by Foucault (Lemke 2011: 51), it is in the “gaps” left by ancient institutions (city-state, Empire, law, religion) that Foucault now posits a role for the ancient *tekhne tou biou*. As we can read in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*:

However pressing the city-state may be, however important the idea of *nomos* may be, and however widespread religion may be in Greek thought, it is never the political structure, the form of law or religious imperatives that can say what a Greek or Roman, but especially a Greek, must do concretely throughout his life (2005: 447)

#### *Limitations of the Foucauldian model*

A number of authors have expressed doubts about Foucault’s demarcation strategy by which Pagan antiquity is kept immune from a wider biopolitical reading. Mika Ojakangas (2016)

has for instance recently highlighted that references to shepherd-kings are actually multiple in Greek literature (Iliad: 2.243; Shield of Heracles, 39; Theogony: 1000; Suppliants: 187–193). Plato’s medical analogies to cure and ‘purify’ the city (*kathairein*, Rep. 3, 399e) are also well-known to historians of philosophy (Vegetti, 1996), as are his suggestions for the political control of sexual reproduction and protection of *ghenos* in *The Republic*. Roberto Esposito has also noted that Foucault’s insulation of Pagan antiquity from biopolitical practices is unconvincing:

How can the power of life and death exercised by Roman *paterfamilias* with respect to their own children be understood if not biopolitically? What distinguishes the Egyptian agrarian politics or the politics of hygiene and health of Rome from protective procedures and the development of life set in motion by modern biopower? (2008: 52–53).

Actually, these are not just rhetorical questions, but one of the enigmas that led Esposito to elaborate his notion of a peculiar “immunitarian semantics” of modern biopolitics (2008). There was biopolitics in the Classical world, Esposito says, but it was not a fully-fledged form, rather a biopower of the *communitas* (as found in Plato for instance) that lacked “the fundamentally immunitarian connotations” of modern biopower. This is why only an immunitarian framework

inserts biopolitics into a historically determined grid. Making use of the immunitary paradigm, one then would have to speak about biopolitics beginning with the ancient world (2008: 52-53)

While I find convincing Esposito’s attempt to pluralize the history of biopower pointing at a shift from a communitarian to an immunitarian/modern paradigm, his privileging a conceptual over a historical or genealogical approach is in my view problematic. Although Esposito (particularly 2011) supports his work with important discussions of Classical

political thought and Roman law, his reference to non-philosophical sources and actual practices in Pagan Antiquity is limited. To go beyond this limitation, in the following part of the article, I explore the possibility of an ancient biopower while adhering to a Foucauldian demand for care of details and analyses of concrete practices and institutions (2008: 3). The case of Roman biopolitics offers one such opportunity.

### *A Roman Biopolitics*

Rome is a particularly uncomfortable case for a sequential demarcation, rather than topological articulation, of sovereignty and governmentality, and in general for insulating Pagan antiquity from a longer history of biopower. As Dean Hammer has noted, many forms of Roman power (particularly the *res publica*) challenges “the coincidence of sovereignty and power that Foucault associates with ancient politics (...) fitting neither Foucault’s characterization of sovereignty nor the care of the self” (2017: 50–51). The reasons for this complication are complex and multilayered. One certainly lies in the peculiar nature of Roman power as a combination of *potestas* and *auctoritas*. The latter term (as linguists since Benveniste have remarked) with its original meaning of augmentation, multiplication, increase (from *augere*, to augment) nicely resonates with the semantics of a productive and multiplying power beyond the boundaries formal sovereignty.

Moreover, there are obvious biopolitical features in Rome that incidentally made the use of Romanity so appealing to Italian Fascism, an intensely biopolitical regime (Cassata, 2006). From the centrality of the Latin word *disciplina*, understood as a military moulding of individual and collective conducts (*disciplina populorum*: Cicero), to conceptions of Roman society as an extended household where patriarchal figures command obedience and raise people from their infancy (Hammer, 2017). The Roman institution of the *ensor* (a special

magistrate established since the 5<sup>th</sup> BCE) has also been highlighted for his control both of the quantitative aspects (census, age, properties, tax collection) and the reputation and morals of the population (*cura morum*) (Ojakangas, 2016).

However it is in the wider moral economy of Roman life with its deeply fluid, negotiable and personal nature of power that is possible to recognize how sovereignty was in fact supplemented by a number of technologies of power that operated on life at a capillary level. Networks of patronage and clientele, *collegia* (professional societies), and the elites' display of benevolence (*beneficentia* and *liberalitas*) through sponsorship or maintenance (*tutela*) of public buildings permeated Roman society outside of legal institutions. They were the fluid interstices where consensus and reputation were won, fame enhanced, dissent repressed, and the conduct of the plebs and elites shaped (Cornell and Lomas, 2005; Peachin, 2011). One renowned example, which has obvious biopolitical resonances, is the manipulation of affects and reproduction of social hierarchies during public spectacles, a quintessential technology of power in Rome. Arenas were places of impositions of norms of conduct (for instance warlike attitudes), integration and distinction between social groups (through a rigid policy of theatre-seating), legitimation of emerging elites, religious celebration, and making of the Roman *populus* and will through acclamation (Rawson, 1987). Gunderson has explicitly compared Roman arenas to the Foucauldian panopticon, describing them as a site of truth-production: a social organ of sight (...) an apparatus which not only looks in on a spectacle, but one which in its organization and structure reproduces the relations subsisting between observer and observed (...) (1996: 116).

Finally we have to notice the direct concern and intervention of Roman authorities in extensive sanitation practices and issues of public health way beyond merely exclusionary practices (Koloski-Ostrow, 2015; Wazer, 2017; see for a wider agenda on premodern urban health: Geltner, 2012). While their effectiveness is debatable, in Rome, the importance of



measures aimed at the *salubritas* (health) and *securitas* (security) of the body of citizenry (*corpus civitatis* or *rei publicae*) is evidenced by the construction and maintenance of aqueducts, the regulation of waste disposal and food, the cleaning of public latrines and canals, curtailing noxious vapours, punishing water thieves and protecting the *vitalitas* (vitality) of civic waters through the appointment of the *curator aquarum*, a ‘water manager’ assigned to the healthfulness (*salubritatem*) and the security (*securitatem*) of the city” (Wazer 2017: 98).

Also, the regulation of reproduction was a systematic concern for Roman authorities. Pro-natalist policies that favoured land possession by families with many children (*lex Julia de Agro Campano*, 59 BCE) and sanctioned childless couples, excluded bachelors (*caelibes*) from inheritance, and compelled remarriage for the divorced (*lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus*, 18 BCE and *lex Papia et Poppaea*, 10 CE) were passed by Caesar and Augustus (see Svet, *Caes* 2. 34). Significantly, unlike the Greeks, Romans privileged an approach that aimed at stimulating life’s increase, not limit it (Ojakangas, 2016: 120) again a significant model for the pro-natalist biopolitics of Italian Fascism.

### *Plato and the impolitical nature of ancient medicine*

Although largely unrecognized in biopolitical debates, wider references to medical knowledge underpinned many of the public health measures aimed at the *salubritas* of Rome. This exclusion of ancient medicine from connection with a wider power of care in Pagan Antiquity is surprising but actually engrained in a prestigious tradition of thought.

Plato is not only a rich source for medical analogies to describe the diseased city but also the initiator of another tradition, one where technical knowledge drawn from medicine is criticized for offering *individualistic answers* to what are in fact problems to be addressed at a political level. In the third book of *The Republic* (405a and ff.), Plato compares the good old

medicine that cured only war wounds, to the diffusion in his own times of techniques, like dietetics and gymnastics, particularly appealing to the elites. Plato condemns the indolence and ultimately private nature of these soft activities that turn away citizens' energy from the care of the polis and even favour the "nursing" of sick lives (3. 406d; Vegetti, 1996: 70).

Besides the obvious eugenic reference, the importance of Plato's text is in consigning the emerging medical knowledge of his time (dietetics, gymnastics, and hygiene) to a sort of "impolitical" space. As Roberto Esposito correctly notes: "contrary to the modern biocratic dream of medicalizing politics, Plato stops short of politicizing medicine" (2008: 54). However, we might wonder how much this Platonic gesture has really been challenged by later biopolitical analyses. Esposito himself does not proceed further to address whether this Platonic individualization of medicine reflected standard practice in Pagan Antiquity or medical conceptions were in fact used in debates on the health of the city to overturn this "impolitical view" (2008: 56 and ff.). Likewise, Foucault's long and sophisticated treatment of dietetics, gymnastics and other medical teachings in the *Use of Pleasure* does not really break this link between ancient medical knowledge and "mastery over *oneself*" (1985: 212, my italics). Dietetics for instance is described as an "art of the everyday relationship of the individual *with his body*" (ibid: 93, my italics), "the way in which one managed *one's existence*" (ibid:, 101, my italics). Of course, Foucault is not proposing a naively individualistic model: quite the opposite – it is a self-in-context and a self-in-dialogue that is at stake here, and the mastery achieved through voluntary moderation, when it comes to rulers or monarchs, has obvious implications for the government of the polis (ibid:, 173). However, to my knowledge, while Foucault *compares* medicine *and* government as stochastic or conjectural arts (for instance in *the Hermeneutics of the Subject*, see 205: 404), he never addresses *how ancient medicine is effectively taken up in the government of the city*, *how its knowledge underpins the construction of public buildings and the production of*

*communal spaces*, such as spas, baths, theatres, harbors, military fortifications and hospitals, and finally *how it shapes collective categories*, such as race, class and gender. It is this point that is at stake in my analysis of three institutions in ancient Rome.

### *Porous Bodies and the Politics of Life in Rome*

Foucault's peculiar access to Pagan antiquity (structure of desire, opposition to an ethics of obligation, care of the self, practices of ancient spirituality and examination of conscience) keeps him quite far from the straight materialism of ancient medical writings, particularly the way in which practices of *bodily* truth and *corporeal* modification were promoted in the ancient city not just as individual responses but in forms of public technologies to modulate the body's inherent instability vis-à-vis mutating milieus. We need to remember here that – as highlighted by historians of medical humoralism (Nutton, 2004; Horden and Hsu, 2013) - the ontology of the Greek and Roman body revolves mostly around the notion of *poroi* (πόροι). *Poroi* are literally the pores, channels or paths that enable a constant exchange between the inner and outer of the body (*foramina* or *venae* for Latins), making it an “infinitely penetrable” entity (Padel, 1992: 58). Given they could be dilated or obstructed by changes in temperature, motion, or moisture of the air, their opening or blocking always put the body at risk of instability and loss of balance. There was no easy recipe to manage such permeability. On one the hand, blocked pores were feared because they would obstruct the discharge of unhealthy or “vicious” humours. Hence, a constant vigilance in monitoring evacuations, excretions, wastes, sweats, urine, and vomit, and the emphasis on techniques such as bloodletting and purges (Horden and Hsu, 2013). On the other hand, apprehension came from the other extreme: open pores would let bad or corrupted things from outside in, and were especially feared at times of epidemics as noted (Celsus, 1.9). However, in this ancient medical literature on corporeal permeability and regulation of bodily fluids, there was more

than individual self-fashioning. Firstly, the notion of corporeal imbalance blurred together disease and moral transgression. Dietetics for instance contributed to the making of strict rules of conduct and often took a moralized twist (Gowers, 1993): intemperance, drunkenness, and gluttony produced a vicious surplus to be discharged. Blood, bile and other humours could be corrupted by excesses, hence the rectifying tone of humoralist advices (Grant, 2000). Secondly, corporeal permeability was unequally distributed among different *groups of people* particularly women and those races not belonging to the Greco-Roman centre. A body porous to external infiltrations was used as a mark of vulnerability to the penetration of social norms and cultural demands, which become stronger the more permeable and socially weaker the body in question is (Meloni, 2019). In the Hippocratic tradition and later in Rome, the female body was regarded as a “leaky vessel”, softer, and hence more impressionable than men’s (Dean-Jones, 1994; King, 1998). Particularly during pregnancy, the special malleability of women led to recurring notions of particular risk, specific regulations for female disease and the prevention of offspring deformation (Soranus, 1.39. 1). A similar effect can be seen for climate-based ethnographies of ancient populations (Thomas, 2000), where some human groups were seen as so influenced by the power of places that they became denigrated as racially inferior. What starts, for instance, in the Hippocratic treatise *Airs, Waters and Places* (part 12) as a relatively innocent remark on the fact that Asians are “more gentle and affectionate” than Europeans for their exposure to a uniform climate (unlike the seasonal changes of Greece), is turned by Aristotle one generation later into the imperial notion that Asians are spiritless, lacking male courage (*andreion*) and therefore naturally inclined to slavery (*Politics*, 1.327b23– 33). This logic of conformity of people to their places offered a key framework for emerging forms of proto-racism (Isaac, 2006) that permeated political and military writings in Greece and Rome and beyond.

*Everyday governmentality of the permeable body in Ancient Rome*

There is here a paradox that has contributed to the myth of a lack of biopower in the ancient world. Greco-Roman antiquity knew no significant forms of “medicalization”. With the exception of the Roman imperial army (as I will observe later), the power of doctors in the everyday life of people was scant, their authority questioned, and the efficacy of their treatment challenged if not overtly ridiculed. Lack of professional control meant that anybody who called themselves a healer would count as a physician (Nutton, 2004). Moreover, in the absence of any theory of pathogen agents, doctors’ intervention was limited to treating the individual (ibid.,). However, this does not imply a lack of “medical” considerations in the shaping of collective structures of the ancient world. Quite the opposite. It is because professional medicine was so ineffective that individual and public measures *in anticipation* of disease were required. It is because at best doctors could address individual cases that *other public figures and fields of knowledge* were invested with the wider task of caring for the health of the city.

Far from being sporadic or confined to isolated medical writings, key institutions of the ancient world were interspersed with knowledge about corporeal permeability and anxiety about its inherent instability. I will analyse in the following sections three core areas of Roman life – a) public bathing, b) urban architecture (Vitruvius), and c) the Imperial army (Vegetius). They offer a unique point of entry into the communal and public regulation of the porous body and highlight the existence of zones of indistinction between natural and political processes, *zoē* and *bíos*, that are otherwise lost in polarized views of antiquity as rigidly divided between a private and a public sphere (Arendt) and are not captured by a view of destructive incorporation *of or over* life by sovereign power (Agamben). They also point to

a much more substantial evidence for the government of the collective body of citizens and their health than Foucault assumed.

### **Sweating and mingling: The biopolitics of public bathing in Rome**

Whereas the origins of bathing in the Mediterranean are mostly private (personal hygiene), bathing in Rome appears as a unique phenomenon in its widespread diffusion, technological innovation, and public significance as a central act of socialization for Roman life (Yegül, 1992; Fagan, 2011). Especially after the establishment of the Empire, the capillary diffusion not only of smaller *balnea*, but also larger scale *thermeae* and monumental *gymnasia*, proceeded steadily with the expansion of Rome; vice versa, closing down a public bath in a province was considered a humiliating measure often anticipating the worst (Yegül, 2010).

The growth of popularity of public bathing in Rome had definitely medical roots. The diffusion of Greek medicine after the first century BCE made increasingly widespread the idea of daily restoring humoral balance via hydrotherapy, a notion that has roots in the Hippocratic literature. ‘Health through water’ was systematically recommended in Rome by doctors (Celsus) and non-medical writers (Pliny the Younger, Vitruvius, or Cicero). Asclepiades of Bithynia, the first influential Greek doctor in Rome (2<sup>nd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> century BC) used water therapy extensively and became known by the nickname of “water healer” (Rawson, 1982). His disciple Antonius Musa gained fame by curing Augustus with cold baths (Fagan, 2002: 86). Galen suggested that missing a single bath during a fever crisis could be dangerous if pores were too obstructed to hamper the discharge of the disease (*On Hygiene*). For many poor Romans, going to the baths was the only way to access some sort of cure: the emperor Hadrian even reserved a special time (after *horam octavam*, i.e. 2pm) every day at the baths for sick people (Fagan, 2002: 253). The medical success of bathing largely depended on a technological innovation that proved decisive for the diffusion of this

infrastructure in Rome: the invention of the *hypocaust*, an underfloor heating device through which hot air was introduced into the bathing space and later to the whole bathhouse (Nielsen, 1993). The hypocaust (*hypocaustum* or *suspensura*) gave the Roman baths their unique characteristic: a number of sequentially heated rooms from cold (*frigidarium*), to medium-hot (*tepidarium*), to hot (*caldarium*) (Fagan, 2011). This had no precedent in the Greek world and was essential for the underlying medical significance of bathing practices: the usage of gradual changes in temperature *to regulate the openness and closure of pores* through which health could be restored. Here the key process for managing corporeal porosity is sweating. Sweat (*sudor*) was understood by Romans “as an extremely subtle humour which oozes from the skin in innumerable drops” (Pliny, Nat His 11.89; Renbourn 1959). Sweating was at the core of the long-standing humoralist belief of “heating and burning” the vicious “plethora” of humours, accumulated through lifestyle excesses or just blocked pores (Stolberg, 2012). In bathing routine, sweating occurred at the climax of the sequential succession from cold to hot rooms in two specifically dedicated rooms (*sudatoria*, with hot stones or a fire) before the final washing and massage in the *unctorium*.

However, understanding bathing as a medical experience only would be too narrow. Well beyond medical purposes, baths embodied the urban way of living in Rome. Romans bathed nearly every day (often completely undressed: *nudi*) and for a considerable part of the day, especially in the afternoon and the later hours, making of baths a sort of anticipation of the forthcoming dinner (Israelowich, 2015). Bathhouses incorporated educational spaces, such as lecture-theatres and reading spaces for poetry, work-out areas for physical exercise or ball games, gardens, libraries, shops (*tabernae*) and restaurants (*popinae*) (Nielsen, 1993). The significance of bathing for the moral economy of Roman life is particularly impressive in the context of a highly hierarchical society like Rome. Unlike seating rank in amphitheatres, which reflected rigid social distinctions (Rawson, 1987), the experience of public baths

encouraged social mingling and circulation. Not only did men and women use the same bathhouse (*balnea mixta*) but public baths were a space where different social classes could physically meet: it was not uncommon in the crowded atmosphere of some of the biggest baths, to see the local elites in close physical proximity to the plebs. This included slaves who were present in the service of their master and, at least in urban contexts, as customers (Fagan, 2002: 205). This is far from saying that the absence of social segregation at bath houses represented a democratic moment in Rome: quite the opposite. Social hierarchies and power rank were not flattened or eluded, but rather displayed and reinforced through a complex social and corporeal semantics of those who bathed: the long queue of staff – water pourers, washers, carriers of towels, servers of food and wine – that cleared the path for a member of the elite, but also different entrances to the venue, different postures and objects such as towels, jewels, and unguents (Fagan, 2011). The complex significance of bathing can be addressed exactly at this twofold biopolitical level. Bathhouses were a social space for making and remaking Roman sociality and *at the same time* the key infrastructure to invigorate life through the opening and closing of pores via hot and cold water. A zone of indistinction of bare and qualified life, physiology and politics, *sudor* and social encounters together (Juvenal: *Satires* 6. 420). A space for outright nudity, but not the nudity of a naked life violently coerced by the ban of sovereign power: rather, a nudity *inter homines*, a mundane nakedness at the very core of the urban landscape. Roman baths are a first example that multiple technologies of power were at work in Rome to foster and regulate life at the population level. Although they did not replace sovereign power, they offered to Imperial munificence a well-defined site of intervention for the care of Roman bodies.

### **Cosmo-biopolitical knowledge and the healthy city: Vitruvius's imperial architecture**



Public baths may seem too directly connected to Hyppocratic notions of hydrotherapy to represent a generalizable case for the influence of medical ideas on public institutions in Rome. Thus, moving focus to urban architecture may add to the argument a further, important layer. Through the analysis of a seminal text – Vitruvius’s *De Architectura* (*On Architecture*, ca. 20 BCE) – I aim to show not only the establishment of a new public role for the architect but also its emerging biopolitical function: managing the porosity of both building materials and biological bodies to protect the health of the city and stimulate the vitality of its social body in relation to ecological and cosmological variables.

While *De Architectura* has been analysed at many levels for its foundational contribution to architectural concepts (*ordinatio*: fitness; *dispositio*: arrangement; *firmitas*: solidity; *utilitas*: functionality; *venustas*: beauty), I will situate it along the lines of other Classical prescriptive texts that suggest rules of conduct (Foucault, 1985). Aimed at future architects and urban planners, these prescriptions and recommendations however do not arise in the gap of sovereign command, but as a direct emanation of its Imperial politics.

### *Porous matter, porous bodies and imperial prestige*

The years immediately following the civil war and the instauration of Augustus’ autocratic regime, when *De architectura* was composed, had profound implications for the politics of architecture in Rome (Fleury, 1990; Lagopoulos, 2009). According to the new Imperial agenda, the image of Rome had to be transformed from one made of bricks to one of marble (Suetonius, *Aug.* 28.3) to celebrate the perfection, stability (*firmitas*) and immortality of the regime. A transitional figure between the chaos of the old Republic and the new order, Vitruvius aligns his treatise directly with this programme (Romano, 2016; Nichols, 2017). In the opening paragraphs, he celebrates the “divine mind and power” of the Emperor who has “care (*curam*) not only for the common life of all men and the regulation of the

commonwealth” (*de vita communi omnium curam publicaeque rei constitutione*) but also at “the fitness (*opportunitate*) of public buildings” and their contribution to the *salubritas* (health) of the city (1.2).

Vitruvius sees the *auctoritas* of both the architect and the emperor as a form of generative power: they are about bringing new magnificent things into existence, shaping and fashioning the “body of architecture” (*corpus architecturae*) to make it naturally congruent with “the body of empire” (*corpus imperii*; McEwen, 2003: 296). To accomplish this ambitious project, Vitruvius recommends rules of conduct to future architects, prescribing a comprehensive familiarity with disciplines as disparate as medicine, astronomy (the influence of stars on living bodies and materials), mathematics and music (to study harmony and proportion) and history (the politics of different ornaments in different Imperial provinces).

Albeit commentators have questioned how much Vitruvius' comments reflected normal practice in Rome or were just regulatory ideas (Morley, 2005), the reason for this synthetic approach is far from being marginal. In Vitruvius we can trace at least two key philosophical influences. The first is Lucretius' philosophy of nature (architects must be educated in *de rerum natura*: 1.1.7) and particularly the Lucretian theme of a particular porosity of matter and bodies to cosmological forces (Nugent, 1994; Weiner, 2016).

The second is the Stoic tradition, with its conception of the world as a complex web of human and non-human agents kept together by a natural bond (*hexis*) or connective forces, such as sympathy (Broweur, 2015). All “learned men” should be aware of the peculiar connections (*rationes*) or *isonomia* between different subjects, Vitruvius claims (1.1.16). When it comes to architecture, the bond is even wider given that the body of the discipline bears a special relationship to the human body, and both depend on wider cosmic influences (see McEwen, 2003: 59–60; Vitruvius 8.3.26–27).

Governing carefully this threefold connection of cosmic forces, living bodies and architectural matter is required for the *salubritas* (health) of the city. *Salubritas*, which recurs either as a noun or in adjectival form more than sixty times in the treatise, is the direct responsibility of the architect. When setting out the plan of a city, Vitruvius famously writes:

The choice of a healthy situation (*electio loci saluberrimi*) is of the first importance. It should be on high ground, in neither a foggy nor rainy region; its aspects should be neither hot nor cold, but temperate in both respects. The neighbourhood of a marsh must be avoided, for in such a site the morning air, uniting with the fogs that rise in the neighbourhood, will reach the city with the rising sun; and these fogs and mists, charged with the exhalation of the marsh beasts, will diffuse an unhealthy effluvia over the bodies of the inhabitants, and render the place pestilent (*locum pestilentem*) (1.4.1)

Vitruvius' careful considerations about the influence of winds, one of the four cosmic elements, are of particular importance (Plommer, 1971; Lagopoulos, 2009). A salubrious city is one where "noxious" or "hot winds" are avoided, where streets are disposed "in such a manner as to dissipate the violence of the winds and render them innocuous". At the same time, the "distribution and situation of buildings within the walls" – streets and lanes networks, avenues (*platearum*) and alleys (*angiportuum*) – should not obstruct the movement of winds so to make the transpiration of the city difficult and its exhalation unhealthy (1.6.1). The analogy with the porous biological body traversed by external forces is obvious: both, city and animal bodies, are made and kept together by the same proportion of heat and moisture, earth and air, the four basic elements (*stoicheia*) (1.4.5). The reason for the sickness of buildings is also the same that may affect towns and bodies: "want" or "superabundance" of elements would "corrupt" or "dissolve" their intimate bonds and *temperature* (internal coherence). Like the doctor, the architect or urban planner has to "use circumspection" to

manage the different elements, avoiding excesses (heat, cold) that may “occupy the pores of the body” (*occupavit corporum venas*) and “unbalance them” (1.4.6; see McEwen, 2003: 62-63). This is not to say however that there are abstract standards for bodies and buildings. Quite the opposite, like the Hippocratic *Airs Waters and Places* (I.1), Vitruvius suggests that the power of place (*proprietas locorum*) and climate (*inclinacionibus caeli*) are predominant. However, *unlike any ancient doctor* who would only look at individual cases, the architect may expand medical knowledge to a much wider scope. As other figures of the Imperial time, like the *curator aquarum* (water manager) the imperial architect aims to ensure the wellbeing of the public body and its individual citizens. Vitruvius argues not only against the use of lead in water pipes (VIII. 6; Hodge, 1981) but also for the systematic building of gardens, parks, and green areas that are understood as effective technologies for the discharge of humoral excesses (as baths). Walks in the open air, Vitruvius writes,

are very healthy, first for the eyes, because from the green plantations, the air being subtle and rarefied, flows into the body as it moves, clears the vision and so by *removing the thick humour from the eyes*, leaves the glance defined and the image clearly marked. Moreover, since in walking the body is heated by motion, the air *extracts the humours from the limbs*, and diminishes repletion (...)” (5.9.5, my italics).

Similar concerns appear in the instructions for designing entertainment sites, such as theatres. During spectacles, the special nature of the public’s emotions make their bodies more susceptible to external influences, including pestilential air coming from unhealthy spots. The architect has to consider carefully this special porosity of the spectators’ body and choose “for the exhibition of games (...) a spot as healthy as possible” (*locus theatro quam saluberrimus*)

For the spectators, with their wives and children, delighted with the entertainment, sit out the whole of the games, and the pores of their bodies being opened by the pleasure they enjoy (*et corpora propter voluptatem inmota patentēs habent venas*), are easily affected by the air, which, if it blows from marshy or other noisome places (*a regionibus palustribus aut aliis regionibus vitiosis advenient*), infuses its bad qualities into the system. These evils are avoided by the careful choice of a situation for the theatre (...) those places where bad air abounds are to be avoided, and wholesome spots to be chosen (*ideo maxime vitandae sunt his rebus vitiosae regions et eligendae salubres*). (III.1-2, my italics).

Interestingly, this Vitruvian passage adds something to the Panopticon-style analysis of the arena discussed above (Gunderson, 1996). The corporeal excitation of the public is not just to be governed from the point of view of inter-human relationships. It presents instead a more-than-human dimension, the regulation of the impact of cosmic forces on the intrinsic instability of bodies. Unsurprisingly given the Stoic and Lucretian influence, something like a *cosmo-biopolitics* gradually emerges, a heterogeneous assemblage of human and non-human agents, power of places and humoral fluxes. Under the benevolent care and mind of the emperor (1.1.2), this fine web of physiology and cosmic agents characterized the politics of life in Rome.

### **The biopolitics of military science: Imperial army**

A third institution whose politics was underpinned by medical knowledge and practices of corporeal permeability in Rome was the Imperial army. It was through Augustus' professionalization of the Imperial army that medical knowledge became institutionalized in Rome substantially raising the social authority of doctors (Israelowich, 2015). Augustus' substantial changes to the structure, politics and image of the Roman army have been

analysed extensively by historians. Two characteristics are of interest for an analysis of ancient biopower. Firstly, unlike the brutal image of the unprofessional army of Republican times, and in line with the Augustan agenda of a beneficial and generative image of the Empire, the new army was portrayed as “a civilizing influence and protector of communities” (Risse, 1999). Secondly, while health care provision to soldiers in the Republican model was occasional and dependent on the will of troop commanders, it was now the public persona of the emperor to appear as having direct responsibility for the health of soldiers (Israelowich, 2015). It is in this context that Augustus’ military reform invested heavily in Greek medicine, particularly through a policy of tax exemptions that attracted hundreds to become *milites medici* (simple doctors) or *medici castrorum* (fortress doctors). The effect of the army’s imperial reorganization on the role of medicine in Rome was profound. Not only it legitimated Hippocratic medicine across Roman society, but it also turned the Roman army into an effective agent of the spread of medical knowledge and infrastructures across society (Jackson, 1988; André 1987: 119 and ff). These included operating theatres, military spas, and especially *valetudinaria*, military hospitals under the control of the camp prefect (Campbell, 1984; Risse, 1999). Occasionally open to the local population, *valetudinaria* played a key role in the development of an ethos of care for the sick (*valetudinarios inspicere*) in Pagan Antiquity, acting as forerunners of later Christian institutions for the amelioration of suffering (Risse, 1999).

*Vegetius’ work: Environmental biopower and health government in the Imperial army*

While it is not possible to follow here the complexity of medical debates in the Roman army, I will focus on a treatise appearing at the end of this historical development, just before the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. It is the work of military strategist Flavius Vegetius Renatus (died ca. 450 CE), the author of *Epitoma Rei Militaris* (Epitome of

Military Science) a four-book treatise on the organization, strategic skills, and machinery of the imperial army that became a required reading for the education of princes and knights well up the Middle Ages (Milner, 1993; Allmand, 2011). The author of a previous veterinary work on animal ailments and anatomy (*Digesta Artis Mulomedicinae*), Vegetius extends his medical interests in the Epitome. In Book Three for instance, all the possible environmental variables that may ensure the government of health in the army (*quemadmodum sanitas gubernetur exercitus*) are analysed. Vegetius focuses on camp location, recommending to avoid nonsalutary areas with too much or too little water, “arid plains and hills” and “marshy neighborhoods” because of their potential for pestilent exhalations. He adds details on the troop dietetic regime (particularly in combination with seasonal changes), water supply, the right time to march or rest in the summer and winter, the importance of firewood and clothes before an expedition. The protection of the army’s wellbeing (*sanitas custodiatur exercitus*) is a matter of the utmost concern (*maxime providendum est*). A soldier’s health, Vegetius claims, “requires constant vigilance” (*diligentia*) not only on the part of the trainee but also of senior commanders. “Daily exercises”, “suitable food” and training “without cease” (*sine intermissione*) are deemed as conducive to health as (or more than) any doctors’ art (Book 3.2: Milner 1993: 65-67). However, while these arguments are consistent with previous analyses of the importance of places for health, it is when it comes to the procedure for selection and rejection of troops that we find in Vegetius a further piece of the Roman biopolitical jigsaw: the transforming of *arguments about corporeal permeability into racializing categories* that discriminate between recruits, their physical skills and mental qualities. Since the Imperial reform, military selection had become formalized through a number of obligatory steps, including a medical test (*probatio*), a four months training and a final oath (Davies, 1989; Webster, 1998). In this context, to obtain a highly trained professional army, Vegetius discusses how regions and different climates affect the

personality of soldiers and their military skills (1.2); differences between urban and rural recruits (1.3); optimum age and height of recruits (1.4-1.5); physiognomic analysis of facial expression and posture (another popular subject since Hippocrates: 1.6); and preferred professional background of the levy (blacksmith, textile mills, fishermen, fowlers, cooks, weavers) (1.7).

Originally conceived as a separate report for the Emperor (possibly Theodosius I), the recruitment chapters have a clear political agenda: casting doubt on the reliability of barbarian mercenaries whose role and number had grown significantly at a time of political crisis and fragmentation in the Roman Empire (Milner, 1993). Although Vegetius' argument is ultimately non-original, relying explicitly ("they tell us") on pre-existing sources (Isaac, 2017), it is still significant. It shows how tropes about porosity of the body and interaction with environmental forces were not forged in abstract philosophical discussions or just at the individual or inter-individual level. Rather, these frameworks were deployed within the military machines of ancient empires as a racializing device to hierarchically distinguish among ethnic groups on the basis of their softness and vulnerability to environmental agents. Although Vegetius is subtle – he does not say that Barbarians are unreliable recruits – his cartography makes a clear case for rejecting troops that do not possess, as Romans do, the "perfect mix of qualities" (Milner, 1993: iii). Vegetius writes,

(...) all peoples that are near the sun, being parched by great heat, are more intelligent but have less blood, and therefore lack steadiness and confidence to fight at close quarters (...). On the other hand the peoples of the north, remote from the sun's heat are less intelligent, but having a superabundance of blood are readiest for wars. Recruits should therefore be raised from the more temperate climes. The plenteousness of their blood gives them contempt for wounds and death, and intelligence cannot be lacking



either which preserves discipline in camp and is of no little assistance with counsel in battle.

Far from being isolated, Vegetius joins a longer tradition of Roman military writings, including those of Ammianus Marcellinus (331–400 ca.), who connected the strength, health, and skills of different troops to their diet, abstinence from “hot baths”, enjoyment of “sweetness of air” and power of “the rays of the sun” (*Roman Antiquities*, 27.4.14; Smith and Campbell, 2004; Isaac, 2017). This complex connection in military writings of health and milieu, human qualities and cosmological agents has been described by historians as an “interlocking arc” of climate, character and intelligence (Irby, 2016: 247). Although it goes beyond the limited space of this article, it is worth mentioning that this framework did not end with pagan antiquity. It had long and rich legacy in medieval military treatises. Here, Eastern populations and Saracens were characteristically portrayed as having less blood in their veins (“dried up by the great heat of the sun”) and hence less available to open battle and more used to recur to poison or other tricks. Military strategists needed to carefully consider these different typologies when confronting their enemies (Weeda, 2016). The continuation and transformation of this collective politics of body permeability in early colonial arguments escapes the limited space of this article.

### **Conclusion: The Case for Ancient Biopower and its Theoretical Significance**

Through an analysis of the politics of life in three ancient institutions of Rome, this article suggests that rather than thinking of biopower as the result of some epochal break, or stemming from an inherent logic of modernity, a topological approach is preferable (Collier, 2009), one that looks at the simultaneous contribution of different technologies of power

(sovereign, disciplinary, biopolitical, and governmental) *since the beginning* of Western politics. If the co-extensive nature of biological and political life is not a distinctive trait of modern politics, it is not justifiable either to postulate one invariable biopolitics across all epochs (Ojakangas, 2016), or turn it into a timeless concept that makes its nuances and plural instantiations unrecognizable (Agamben, 2005). A closer look at the peculiar ontology of the porous body in ancient humoralism demonstrates significant biopolitical differences from modern biopower: medical writings (by doctors or other public experts) do not reduce biology to bare life nor do they conceive of bodies as fixed and insulated or population as an abstract aggregate of individuals (in the statistical sense of modern biomedicine); they instead describe a continuous putting-into-form of the mere fact of life (humours, fluids) through the productive action of social technologies (baths, theatres) acting at distance on pores; biological identity is not given at birth but requires a constant intervention on the individual and social body to carefully regulate the ubiquitous metabolizing of life; in planning public buildings, a visible non-anthropocentric emphasis is attached to the agency of cosmological forces and the interfolding arc of human and non-human agents; racial differences (and racialist hierarchies) are not produced on the basis of abstract qualities in population but result from the continuous exchange of matter and bodies in different milieus and climates. Still, this was a form of biopower. If we take some required elements for a definition of the biopower: i) *truth-discourses* about the vital character of human beings; ii) *competent authorities*; iii) *collective intervention* in the name of health or life; and iv) *modes of subjectification through individual or collective practices* (Rabinow and Rose, 2006), it is fair to recognize that all of them were at play in the above analysis of politics of life in Rome. Even conceding that life in its abstractness is a modern concept (Lemke, 2011: 62), a longer history of practices and institutions, rather than just concepts, illuminates a more complex family-album for mechanisms and technologies of life incentivization and regulation. Probably

we need a pluralization and a diffraction of the notion of biopolitics through different systems of knowledge, underpinned by multiple ontologies of the body and epistemologies of life.

The theoretical potential of these findings for contemporary debates can be seen at a twofold level. Firstly, for its emphasis on the power of cosmological agents, its non-anthropocentric features, and its interfolding of bodies and milieu, this historical material offers a number of important sources for contemporary debates on biopower as “unavoidably ‘environmental’” (Lorimer, 2017: 40). While many have looked at Foucault’s later lectures on liberalism (Foucault, 2008: 269–271) as a source for emerging analyses of environmental regimes of power (Massumi, 2009), one can certainly find here a further historical layer for Foucauldian concepts of intervention on the milieu (both natural and artificial) as a medium to act at a distance on bodies (2007: 20–21). In particular, given that emerging forms of environmental biopower privileges a logic that *work with* emergent properties of nature, rather than over or against them (Lorimer, 2017), this bears strong analogies with the politics of corporeal permeability that I have described above. Based on a dynamic view of nature where bodies and matter were not reduced to dead mechanisms (Lucretius’s philosophy of nature was a key source for Vitruvius), ancient forms of environmental biopower well resonate with the transformative attitude of *probiotic* environmentalities where the modernistic molding or securing of life is replaced by a modulation of the “naturalness of nature” within the organism and in wider socio-ecological systems (Braun, 2014: 60; Lorimer, 2017: 36).

Was then the Roman biopolitics here described a fully affirmative politics of life? Here we can find a second element of theoretical significance for these findings. Rather than a logic of protection and immunization of life, what emerges from the politics of life in Rome was that the vital characteristics of the population were constantly modulated by the subtle opening and closing of pores in communal structures like baths or theatres. These structures

brought together sovereign power and bare life in a subtle and dynamic way that is not well captured by the thanatopolitical description of Agamben (2005). Rather, there is an obvious sense that what is described here as porous and vulnerable bodies may contribute and even complement contemporary debates on “affirmative biopolitics” (Esposito, 2008; Tierney, 2016). Esposito in particular has suggested reverting the thanatopolitical semantics of modern biopower by emphasizing non-immunitarian conceptions of the social bond, in which a common form of life is found in an obligation without expectation of reciprocity. What is described here as porous bodies can be seen as a version of Esposito’s strategy to disrupt and overcome the sovereign enclosure of the modern body<sup>1</sup>. Esposito, after all, embeds his view of community into the Roman concept of service or gift (*munus*) and connects his analysis of donation and exchange to Classical mythology (Homer) and philosophy (Plato) (Tierney, 2016).

However if the Roman politics of life I have analysed here supports the research into a non-immunitarian biopolitics or resonates with contemporary ideas of environmentalities, it may also represent a glitch or a friction for these debates, especially when a speculative modality prevails over a more “modest empiricism” attentive to nuances and small peculiarities about biopower (Rabinow and Rose, 2006). It reminds us that a politics of life – even if conceived into a non-immunitarian medical framework – can always be taken up in strategies of optimization, normalization and *conservatio vitae*. Even when underpinned by practices of body porosity, which do not repel entanglement with others or the power of the milieu, a politics of life cannot be analysed outside of structural violence, strategies of colonial protection or even collective hostility, as the case of Vegetius shows. The gift of historical materials to contemporary debates is that it helps grounding theoretical claims into the contextual complexity of real practices and institutions. This gift is also a poison then, as

in the double etymology of the term (Mauss, 1997). Beware of Romans, one could say, especially when they bear gifts.

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