

ROBERTO ESPOSITO. *MODERNITY BETWEEN IMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY*. POLITY PRESS, 2023.

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Abstract: This paper presents a review of the book: *Common Immunity: Biopolitics in the Age of Pandemic* by Roberto Esposito. The work was initially published in Italian in 2020 and was translated into English in 2023.

Keywords: Biopolitics, Immunity, Community, Pandemic, COVID-19.

Résumé : Ce texte présente un compte-rendu du livre : *Common Immunity: Biopolitics in the Age of Pandemic* de Roberto Esposito. L'ouvrage a été initialement publié en italien en 2020 et a été traduit en anglais en 2023.

Mots clés : Biopolitique, Immunité, Communauté, Pandémie, COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made biopolitics more explicit than ever before as the focal point of the political rationality of our time. This phrase could be the motto of Roberto Esposito's work: *Common Immunity* (Esposito, 2023), first published in Italian (Idem., 2020) in 2020 and now available to English-speaking readers since 2023. Beyond this motto, in this book Esposito presents a rigorous reflection on political thought between the notions of community and immunity, concluding the work with his analyses of the unprecedented emergence of a global common immunity.

The book is structured into five chapters. The first is dedicated to the relationship of belonging and opposition between the concepts of immunity and community. Esposito begins by postulating that the two concepts are intrinsically linked. The notion of immunity has its origins in Roman law. It was born as that which separates someone from the general application of common law. In this way, immunity is seen as a negative force that segregates part of individuals from the whole because of their position or status. The most obvious examples are diplomatic immunity or immunity from taxation. The fact is that, until the end of the 19th century, the only meaning of immunity was this political-

legal meaning. On the one hand, if from the point of view of the concept, immunity has its birth in the sphere of law, on the other hand, in the actual history of our species, the birth of immunity coincides with that of the community itself. This is because, from a biological point of view, it is impossible for a community to exist without there being a shared immunity. In this way, the term immunity is born as an opposition to community. Even so, in the biological sense, you cannot conceive of a community without shared immunity.

Roberto Esposito also points out in this inaugural chapter that even though the finished biological concept of immunity was only possible after the discovery of microorganisms in the late 19th century, this did not prevent various political and military uses of immunity before then. The examples are presented briefly, but it is worth noting the role that European immunity played in the invasion of the Americas. Much more than any military incursion, the deliberate spread of diseases from Europe was the deadliest weapon to land in the new world. The immunological fragility of the native populations of the Americas in the face of the diseases brought by the Europeans, in Esposito's words, "laid the conditions for one of the most horrifying hecatombs in human history". (Idem, 2023, p. 28).

With the invention of microbiology and infectiology after the discovery of the microscopic world, all this legal, political, and military jargon was transposed into medicine. Biological immunity came to be understood as a warlike defence of the organism against the danger of an external infectious agent. If biology came to be described in political-military terms, it is important to emphasise that this science was also taken into the heart of military campaigns. Esposito even mentions that, with the development of vaccines and the creation of the Pasteur Institute in France, "Pasteur became the most influential general in deciding French fortunes" (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 43). In these terms, it can be said that the progress of biological research in France largely contributed to the frontier's expansion of its colonial empire.

This set of medical and biological advances gained state strategic importance at the beginning of the 20th century. The same rivalry that existed in international relations was thus reproduced in the development of science. Esposito concludes this section of his work by showing these disputes that brought the Pasteur Institute in France and the Koch Institute in Germany into a battle arena, indicating victories and defeats for both sides on this front.

In the second chapter, the author turns his analyses to democracy. In general terms, he seeks to show how this political form, which for the last two hundred years has been called democracy, is fundamentally an immune system. To understand this, we must first realise that a key concept in this work is the notion of an immune paradigm. What Esposito highlights with this concept is that immunisation is first and foremost a process of differentiation and exclusion. It is the principle that defends life by imposing limits that separate the “self” from the “other”. It is what identifies the agent that does not belong to the organism and eliminates it. It is the barrier that constitutes identity by excluding alterity. By treating democracy as an immunisation system, it emerges from the analyses that its protective devices sometimes turn against itself, resulting in a form of “autoimmune” effects in democracy. Taking Derrida’sⁱⁱ reflections as a reference, Esposito summarises this immunity-based conception of democracy as follows:

By erasing the singularity of differences, democratic practice negates the equality of differences, thereby also negating democratic practice itself. (Esposito, 2023).

By tracing the genealogy of the concept, Esposito shows that since its origins in Greece, democracy has already carried this ambiguity. Throughout its history, the use of the term democracy even coincided with the notion of dictatorship, as appears in the writings of Appian of Alexandria when referring to the disputes between Caesar and Pompey or even in Cassius’s use of the wordⁱⁱⁱ.

In the case of modern democracies, its autoimmune tendency can already be seen in the disputes between choosing political representation instead of building popular sovereignty. The introjection of the aristocratic element becomes even clearer in the choice of election models instead of random selection. This construct of liberal democracies shows itself to be an institutional model of defence, where elected representation is justified by its supposed ability to give government the predictability that either direct participation of citizens or the random drawing of representatives would not guarantee. By introducing these elements based on the ambition of government stability, it ends up producing exclusionary mechanisms that contradict the very principles of equality and freedom that should guide democracy. In short, Esposito defines this autoimmune nature as:

Democracy immunizes itself against excessive identification by means of an element foreign to its own mode of being; however, like an autoimmune

disease, this element threatens to destroy it. The more democratic it is, the more aristocratic it is, too. The principle of representation's increasingly pronounced primacy into its oligarchic opposite (Esposito, 2023, p. 67).

Esposito also highlights how these elements of exclusions have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, transforming biopolitics into “immunopolitics”. Measures such as social distancing, camera surveillance and restricting the movement of citizens exemplify how the pursuit of sanitary security can lead to the fragmentation of social life and the erosion of common experience.

Finally, it must be recognised that the task of guaranteeing the survival of democracy is to build a model capable of balancing the tension between the opposing drives for security and the preservation of freedom and equality. Esposito speaks of the need to build a democratic “co-immunity” based on the ability to integrate conflict itself as a democratic institution. At the same time, it is a question of protecting itself without turning against itself, centring its efforts on practices of inclusion and strengthening the bonds of solidarity, rather than excluding and fragmenting the social body. Accepting the conflictual nature of democracy means recognising that the immune ambition to put an end to conflicts is what also threatens democracy itself. In summary, “civil conflict is an integral part of the civilizing path”. (Idem. Ibidem. p. 82).

After analysing democracy, Roberto Esposito devotes the third chapter of his book to the notion of Biopolitics, fundamentally based on Foucault's approach. He begins by dismissing some of the criticisms levelled at this thinking. The main one being the claim that Foucault uses biopolitics as a “transcendental horizon within which our entire contemporary experience revolves.” (Idem, Ibidem, p. 85). In short, the criticisms pointed out by Esposito accuse Foucault of producing a historical emptying of both the notion of biopolitics and the analyses based on it. The aim of this section was to show that the reality of Foucault's thinking points in the opposite direction of these criticisms. In fact, the French philosopher's entire endeavour in his works consists precisely of making the notions he employs emerge from history, distancing himself from both traditional historicism and determinism. Foucault is thus able to create his own genealogy capable of showing the imbrication of knowledge in the power relations of the historical moment that gave them their conditions of possibility.

In this way, the appearance of the notion of biopolitics in Foucault's thinking is not only thoroughly rooted in history, but the analyses that are made from it are rigorously placed in their proper historical time. This is how the term biopolitics appears not as the

protagonist of the reflections in the course^{iv} it is entitled, but rather as an adjunct that emerges from Foucault's thoughts on the liberal and neoliberal ways of governing between the 18th and 20th centuries.

Precisely from Foucault's approach to liberalism, Esposito manages to put his general categories of analysis back into operation. He points out that the liberal way of governing operated an immunity *dispositif*, conjuring up, once again, the risks of autoimmunity. In these terms, Foucault indicates that liberalism is a political rationality that produces freedom for the governed, but in the face of the risks arising from the exercise of these liberties, it also makes institutions of surveillance and discipline appear that consume these freedoms. For Esposito, this is the operation *ipsis litteris* of his immunisation *dispositif*. Bentham's panopticon was the greatest expression of this *dispositif* in the 19th century. In this context, the generalisation of the disciplinary exercise of power with the possibility of engendering a general surveillance society is what signals the risk of autoimmunity. "A fracture thus forms in the heart of freedom and pushes toward its logically opposite dimension of security" (Esposito, 2023, p. 106). In this case, the prevention of risks arising from the exercise of freedom would end up putting in place instruments capable of putting an end to freedom itself.

This autoimmune dynamic of liberalism eventually conjured up the crisis of this way of governing. As a response to this crisis, neoliberalism emerged. This is not a return to frugal government that must limit itself to produce freedom for individuals. The centrepiece of this 20th century political rationality will be the meticulous intervention of the technologies of government within civil society. The aim is to ensure that society functions according to the same principles as the competitive efficiency of the market. In short, the ambition is to ensure social aggregation based on the principle of competition between individuals. In this intertwined game in which society's aggregation is sought based on a profoundly disintegrating element, the negative side of the immunity system is once again apparent. Esposito goes so far as to emphasise that, even in a course dedicated to the birth of biopolitics, it is unable to find a positive form (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 109), ending up in the ambivalence of autoimmunity.

The final idea presented in this chapter arises from this desire to be able to indicate a positive facet of biopolitics. Esposito believes that, to do this, it is necessary to turn to institutions as an essential way of mediating relationships. Life and institution appear side by side, understanding that life is more than its biological aspect, understanding institutions themselves as an organism that is born, develops, and perishes. In this process,

the institution must be a perennial mediating element, but not a static one. It leads those who pass through it, while at the same time being part of the same historicity as their bodies. In these terms, together with society, the institution makes up a certain way of life of which it is a part. It mediates relationships, mitigates elements of disaggregation, stabilises conflicts, but is still capable of transformation. “Only in this way will biopolitics and institutions find the affirmative drive that gives a political value to our lives.” (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 118).

The fourth chapter of the book is dedicated to the immunisation *dispositif*. Esposito goes into great depth in his presentation of this notion, exhibiting the breadth of its reach. To size up the scope he attributes to immunisation, we can use the author’s words: “civilisation can be understood as a noble name given by historians to the immunisation process” (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 120). He also mentions that modernity could be referred to as “the age of immunisation” (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 120). From the beginning of this chapter for Esposito, the immunity *dispositif* is the great reading key capable of making intelligible the constitution of the contemporary world itself.

The path he draws begins with Heidegger^v, where the German philosopher’s commentary on Descartes’ *Meditations* is presented as a modernity’s process of immunisation. The securing of the self (*me esse*) by the act of thinking (*me cogitare*) is described exactly as “the fundamental formula of every self-securing calculation” (Esposito, 2023, p. 123), a self-defence typical of immunity. To summarise, the underlying issue that Espósito raises from Heidegger is an effort to reduce the world to an image on the level of thought. In this process, the subject is secured as master and the world as an object to be conquered. This creates a form of immunisation of the subject as active certainty and a neutralisation of the world as passive exteriority.

The author then turns to Nietzsche. To place him within the framework of his categories, Espósito postulates that “Immunity, it could be said, is the self-defensive mode of a life that tends to go beyond itself — to gaze out onto the nothingness that surrounds it.” (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 124). In these terms, the life that is identical to the will to power and to ensure its preservation, to some extent needs to deny itself. This is the element of immunisation. To put it more explicitly, Esposito posits that life is in itself a disease and the medicine intended to contain it is like a poison that carries the taste of death (Cf., Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 127). This is also how the problem of autoimmunity and a certain aporia arises, since it is necessary to recognise that life that cannot go beyond its own preservation is a renunciation of itself, incapable of seeking any form of control.

Esposito still finds a spark of hope to get out of this aporia. Although he recognises it as a point at odds with Nietzsche's work, he highlights a brief passage where an element of individual weakness and degeneration appears to be capable of linking immune action with the community (Cf., *Idem*, *Ibidem*, p. 129). The different element could be incorporated into the whole, as something new, capable of ennobling the common rather than simply being excluded by the regular functioning of the immunisation *dispositif*.

Also in this chapter, Esposito refers to Freud. From a psychoanalytical perspective, he reinforces Nietzsche's ambivalent account of modernity. Freud describes civilisation as an immunological device that protects men from existential anxiety, but at the cost of repressing their erotic and aggressive impulses. This trade-off leads to the "discontents" of civilisation as an autoimmune response. In other words, "the community becomes the battleground between Eros and Thanatos" (*Idem*, *Ibidem*, p. 133).

For Esposito, both *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilisation and Its Discontents* are works in which Freud presents sacrifice as an immunological mechanism through which society expels violence. The reflection on the notion of sacrifice continues with a reference to René Girard. This is where he connects the sacrificial device more directly to the immunological paradigm. Sacrifice operates as a form of violence that aims to restore social order by purging the contagion of mimetic violence.

Both the sacrificial and the immune *dispositifs* are always about expelling an intruder that threatens to destroy the human body or the body politic (*Idem*, *Ibidem*, p. 138).

It is about delivering the scapegoat to interrupt the continuity of violence that is satisfied by the sacrificial offering. The final transposition to contain the generalised eruption of violence appears in man's unprecedented ability to put an end to his time through the eruption of an event capable of making the continuity of the species unfeasible. "This risk of self-destruction signals the limit beyond which the sacrificial-immune dynamic can be taken no further." (*Idem*, *Ibidem*, p. 138). He thus points to the apocalypse not exactly as the end of the world, but as the beginning of a new era in which the notion of human responsibility reaches an unprecedented level, without the possibility of resorting to a dynamic of sacrifice to contain the violence that humanity itself has become capable of unleashing.

This chapter also explores the contributions of Niklas Luhmann and Jacques Derrida to the immunological paradigm. Luhmann, from a systems theory perspective,

sees immunity as a mechanism by which social systems distinguish themselves and safeguard their surroundings.

The system reproduces itself by selecting novel elements that are compatible with its resilience; it separates them out from those that could undermine it (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 141).

He argues that immunity is essential for the survival of the system, but it can also lead to rigidity and the inability to adapt to change. Derrida, on the other hand, explores more closely the concept of “autoimmunity”, where the immune system turns against the very body it is supposed to protect as “the inevitable outcome of the immunization process” (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 145). He sees this as an analogy for the tendency of modern societies to destroy themselves through their own defence mechanisms.

The chapter concludes by emphasising the continuing relevance of the immunological paradigm for understanding modernity itself. Esposito connects the ideas of Heidegger, Nietzsche, Freud, Girard, Luhmann and Derrida in a cadence that leads him to Sloterdijk’s explorations of immunological spaces and spheres of globalisation (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 153). He suggests this process contributes to understanding the challenges faced by contemporary societies, for whom immunological measures are an increasingly frequent response to perceived threats. The chapter ends by revisiting the tension between *immunitas* and *communitas*, pointing to the possibility of constructing humanity as a political concept capable of enabling “a global immune design — something like a ‘co-immunism’” (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 156).

In the last chapter of his book, Roberto Espósito connects the ideas from the previous chapters, mobilising them to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The text begins by mentioning the book: *Microbial Storms: Public Health in the Transatlantic World*^{vi} by Patrick Zylberman. This work comments on the European and American policies adopted between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century to mitigate the risks of pandemics and bioterrorist attacks. Zylberman argues that fictional works about catastrophe, which were sometimes inspired by scenarios developed by (mainly USA) intelligence services, played a relevant role in the implementation of preventive and security policies for biological risks. Both literature and cinema have fuelled a “logic of the worst” in the public imagination, the effect of which has been to amplify fears of a microbiological threat.

Writers and film directors were not the only ones to warn of a pandemic. Virologists and other experts have been warning since the 2000s that a new pandemic would trigger a global crisis with vaccine shortages, overburdened hospitals, and a frozen economy. Yet, what Espósito points out is that the COVID-19 pandemic has surpassed even the worst scenarios imagined by fiction. “Reality, rather than imagination, now seems unbelievable.” (Esposito, 2023, p.159).

The text goes on to discuss the ethical and biopolitical dilemmas posed by the pandemic. The right to life appears as a logical and historical premise for all other rights. However, this does not authorise the unrestricted suppression of individual freedoms. The debate in Italy over the selection criteria for medical treatment during the initial peak of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this clash of fundamental rights. When treatment resources were limited in relation to the number of patients at risk of death, questions about how to allocate these resources fairly thematised the public debate. The Italian Society of Anaesthesiology, Analgesia, Reanimation and Intensive Care (SIAARTI) proposed prioritising patients with a “higher probability of treatment success”, which may have led to the exclusion of older patients with lower life expectancy. In a contrary position, the National Bioethics Committee postulated that decisions on the use of health resources should be based exclusively on clinical criteria, excluding any discrimination based on age, gender, ethnicity, social status, disability or responsibility for spreading the infection. In any case, this issue becomes minor in the face of the need to promote the necessary precautions precisely to avoid contemplating these “tragic choices”.

In this scenario, Espósito draws attention to an acceleration caused by the pandemic. This is an increase in the intertwining between immunisation and technicalisation. Although the immunisation paradigm was born in the legal sphere, the effort of Esposito’s work was to indicate how this *dispositif* gradually expanded into biology and other domains, becoming dominant in contemporary times. In a way, this has led to a process of depoliticization, strengthening decision-making under criteria presented as “technical”, thus empowering the figure of the specialist, capable of delimiting the field of political action or sometimes even usurping it completely. Esposito warns that this path of technisation is not the antithesis of authoritarianism, but may even be one of its facets. It is therefore clear that the pandemic has accelerated a long-standing process of building an immunitarian democracy with this hypotrophy of politics in favour of technique.

Any government not born of political confrontation and conflict is not capable of making decisions about the future of society; it limits itself to administering it (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 175).

Espósito then goes on to conclude by pointing out how the very notion of biological immunity has changed, moving away from a model of isolating the body with the task of eliminating all external elements, towards the notion of a system that mediates exchanges and can incorporate alterity into its interior. Thus, defending the organism becomes less an effort to isolate and more an action to integrate difference, thus mitigating the distance between immunity and community.

Transposing this into the sphere of government practices would consist of a positive biopolitics. This indicates that the body's immunological system offers a model for how political systems can open to alterity. Just as the immune system welcomes the outside into itself, creating a place of continuous exchange between inside and outside, political systems must also be able to incorporate difference without fearing conflict, but integrating it. It is precisely the realisation that the very management of conflict is what strengthens the practice of government and certifies the health of the community.

In any case, Espósito's final analysis does not lead in a very optimistic direction. "The world was unified first by the overwhelming spread of the virus and later by the demand for immunity that it generated" (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 188). But as soon as vaccines began to appear, that same community was fragmented by the repeated actions of states that made access to the immuniser absolutely unequal. Even so, the pandemic has put the need for common immunity on the agenda in an unprecedented way. This allows Espósito to put an end to his work with the hope that we can come closer to rediscovering the bonds of belonging between community and immunity to understand that "the life of each is protected only by the life of all." (Idem, *Ibidem*, p. 190).

Lato sensu, it can be said that in this book Ricardo Esposito presents the result of a robust work capable of reading modernity itself between the poles of immunity and community. It is a synthesis of the author's research that finds in the COVID-19 pandemic the moment to make his postulates more explicit than ever before. As such, the reader shouldn't expect an analysis centred on the pandemic or the policies put in place during this period, although this does find a place in the text, albeit a supporting one. What does take centre stage in the book is a much broader reflection on biopolitics as a key to a wider reading of our own time.

Possibly the most controversial elements of Esposito's analyses are his assertions about pandemic containment policies. Esposito suggests that confinement and collective monitoring measures in times of health emergency would be cases in which the autoimmune character of democracy would be reinforced. This brings him closer to some positions defended by Giorgio Agamben in a set of texts^{vii} published in 2020 at the time of the outbreak of the pandemic, where the philosopher even flirts with a negationist discourse on the epidemic. Esposito doesn't go that far, but there is still a certain distrust of the social protection measures that he and Agamben share. This suspicion sometimes leads them to reduce the differences in nature between the welfare state and totalitarianism to mere differences of degree. Curiously, this is a move similar to Hayek's theses^{viii} in his book *The Road to Serfdom*^{ix}.

Even so, this is a detail that shouldn't overshadow the many merits of the book, including its treatment of the pandemic itself and its long-lasting effects on government policies. Esposito traces a long history of modernity in which the tension between community and immunity is emphasised. In the course of this process, he strings together a very heterogeneous group of thinkers. Without reducing them to a common identity, Esposito shows how in this diversity of theoretical references the dynamics of *immunitas* and *comunitas* always insist on manifesting itself. The tension between these notions finds its most palpable manifestation precisely in the COVID-19 pandemic, when for the first time we can concretely see the need for the conception of a common global immunity.

Much more than an analysis of the pandemic or the contemporary role of biopolitics, Esposito's book presents a reflection in which the old dichotomy between difference and identity is concretely placed at the poles of immunity and community. This work is thus able to articulate its efforts to point out the paths that are emerging contemporaneously from this global health crisis. Roberto Esposito can conclude his book with an overture to a time that is still in dispute, where nothing is yet definitively defined. This final opening is thus an invitation to think about contemporaneity, making analyses of history a fertile field for instigating reflection about the present.

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ⁱⁱ The reasoning presented takes as its source four works by Jacques Derrida in particular: *Force of Law*, *The Politics of Friendship*, *The Other Heading* and *Rogues*.

ⁱⁱⁱ On this point, Esposito takes as his source Lucio Canfora's book: *Democracy in Europe: A History of an Ideology*.

^{iv} One of the works mentioned by Esposito in which part of Foucault's reflections on biopolitics appear is the course given by the philosopher at the Collège de France in 1979. FOUCAULT, Michel. *Naissance de la Biopolitique : Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979)*. EHESS, Gallimard et Seuil. Paris. 2004.

^v The work of Heidegger on which Esposito relies is the text: *The Age of the World Picture*.

^{vi} ZYLBERAN, Patrick. *Tempêtes microbiennes : Essai sur la politique de sécurité sanitaire dans le monde transatlantique*. Gallimard. Paris. 2013.

^{vii} This is a collection of six texts by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben published between February and April 2020. They are: *L'invenzione di un'epidemia (Il Manifesto)*, 26 February 2020), *Contagio* (11 March 2020), *Chiarimenti* (17 March 2020), *Riflessioni sulla peste* (27 March 2020), *Distanziamento sociale* (6 April 2020) and *Una domanda* (13 April 2020).

^{viii} Hayek postulates that state interventions in the field of economics, especially those aimed at alleviating social inequalities, would be a path towards the construction of a total state along the lines of the German

Third Reich or Soviet communism. In his argument, Hayek ends up treating totalitarianism merely as a degree of greater state intervention, implying that between the social policies of the welfare state and totalitarianism there would only be a difference in scale. For him, the road to serfdom would be precisely the process of welfare state hypertrophy, which would inexorably lead to totalitarianism. In this sense, when Agamben sees emergency policies to contain the pandemic as the path to a permanent exception where the imperative of security suppresses all freedom, it is pertinent to emphasise that this is a way of conceiving state action very similar to the one Hayek presented in 1944.

^{ix} HAYEK, F. A. *The Road to Serfdom: text and documents*. The University of Chicago Press. Routledge, London. 2007.