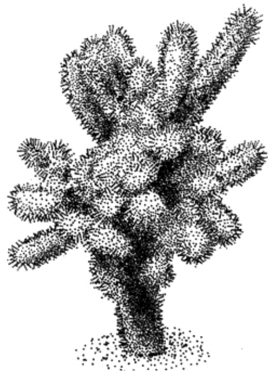

the committee for the study of desert alchemy

The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy

Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity

Introduction: The Resilience of Life

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INTRODUCTION

The Resilience of Life

We live in a biological age. The ecological crisis has heightened our sensibilities of the intrinsic value of the life of all species and encouraged the development of a biocentric ethics. From a different angle, the ability to generate synthetic acellular life and to prolong the life of a brain-dead human being presents us with new examples of bare life and again raises the question of just what life inescapably is.[1] The question is not only a philosophical problem, as decisions about whether to prolong or terminate life depend on how we understand what life is and what expressions such as "good as dead" or "a life not worth living" should mean. As life becomes the object of ever more sophisticated technical manipulation and enters the circuits of commerce, we also have new questions about how genetic engineering and therapy and assisted reproduction should be regulated, about whether the genome can be owned, about whether stem cells are yet a life, about whether embryos have rights, and about whether animals should be cloned or made into commodities just for their hormones or parts. Today, as Nikolas Rose has laid out in a brilliant phenomenology of the new biosociety, scientists, bioethicists, and science-fiction writers are all tantalized by the new possibilities of knowing life not simply to restore a lost normativity but to transform it at conception, in utero, and at the molecular level.[2] Such manipulation of life now overshadows biopolitical concerns like state management of bodies for docility and population for quality.

The more successful the manipulation of life (and the more lifelike our artifacts), the greater are the scientific and expert doubts about our intuitive sense that the animate can be distinguished from the inanimate. However that distinction is drawn—for example, the prototypes of each and the liminal types do vary cross-culturally; the tree is prototypical of the animate for the Malagasy and the virus the chief liminal form for us—the tendency to want to draw a distinction between the animate and inanimate

may itself be universal.[3] Yet reductionist science has threatened to undermine the fundamental ontological division even though it cannot dislodge our common-sense notion that living things are set apart by a few rather astonishing properties—autonomy, robustness, adaptability to environmental changes, self-repairability, and reproduction, to name a few of their characteristics.

Still we seem now to have fully demystified life, though not too long ago it was held to be not only a marvelous but wholly mysterious thing. As late as the early modern period—and long after the rise of mathematical physics—it was believed, for example, that toads could be generated from ducks putrefying on a dung heap, a woman's hair laid in a damp but sunny place would turn into snakes, and rotting tuna would produce worms that changed first into flies, then into a grasshopper, and finally into a quail.[4] How life—this special domain of the universe—reproduced, developed, and maintained itself was beyond any rational understanding, but life has now been put within the grasp of scientific understanding if not technical control, and in the process the animate has almost been collapsed into the inanimate.

That a reductionist understanding of life has been achieved is remarkable, since the very plenitude of life—its fullness, variety, and complexity—is one of the essential characteristics of life. For this reason, it may seem that the things "we denote as 'living' have too heterogeneous characteristics and capabilities for a common definition to give even an inkling of the variety contained within this term."[5] Yet we now know that almost all life forms—from unicellular bacteria to the higher animals—share the same metabolic processes, organized around the intricate Krebs cycle. And science has also discovered that almost all life forms, from an oak tree to a frog, express "their genetic information in nucleic acids, use the same genetic code to translate gene sequences into amino acids, and (only with some exceptions in the case of plants) make use of the same twenty amino acids as the building blocks of proteins."[6] The discovery of DNA is widely thought to have dissipated the belief that life was somehow a mysterious, impalpable excrescence that lay beyond the scientific disciplines of physics and chemistry. Life has now become nothing more interesting than a specific kind of information in an information age. As John Maynard Smith notes, "code, translation, transcription, message, editing, proof-reading, library and synonymous: these are all technical terms with quite precise meanings in molecular genetics."[7] Machines may not now or ever be lifelike, but the gap between the inanimate and animate no longer seems unbridgeable without a divine breath of life. Reduced to information, life may in fact

In the companion study on which I am at work, *The Promise of European Decline*, I discuss these ideas and vitalism more generally as a philosophy of history; there the paradox is in Alejo Carpentier's well-known debt[51] to the reactionary Spengler's historical and cultural organicism and Césaire's less well-known critical, if not inverted, appropriation of Nietzsche's polemics on antiquarian and monumental histories to the perspective of life. In this study, however, I am more interested in life philosophy as a metaphysics and epistemology.

appear no more ontologically interesting than stardust. The French geneticist Albert Jacquard drew the radical conclusion:

> We have known for some forty-five years, thanks to the discovery of DNA, that the boundary between inanimate objects and animate beings was more the result of an optical illusion than objective reality. What appeared three billion years ago was not "life," but a molecule that happened to be endowed with the capacity to make a copy of itself—to reproduce. This capacity is due to its double-helix structure and the process is not particularly mysterious; it is the result of the same interactions between atoms as those which are at work in all other molecules. The word "life," therefore, does not define a specific capacity possessed by certain objects; it simply translates our wonder at the powers these objects have: those of reproduction, of reaction, of struggle against the environment. But these powers are the result of an interaction of the same natural forces as those in a pebble. Like everything around us, we human beings are "stardust."[8]

Still, the technological and reductionist framing of life in terms of energy or information only touches life at its fringes. Even if not mysterious, life remains what is both most intimate and opaque to us. We have an intuitive sense of what it is to be or rather feel alive, or to participate in life or, say, a lively conversation free of stereotypical responses, but we struggle to find the language with which to describe this primal yet ineffable sense. Rudolf Makkreel remarks that the cultural philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey shared surprisingly with the great rationalist philosopher Immanuel Kant the sense that life is "simply an ultimate behind which we cannot go" and that both thinkers repeatedly appeal to a sense or feeling of life to elucidate their basic concepts. For example, we do not so much know what self-sameness or the persistence of the self through change is, as we have experience of this real category only as it arises out of the flow of life itself. Our categories are rooted in life, Dilthey argued, and thought cannot go beyond it: life remains unfathomable to thought.[9]

One other difficulty is the word "life" itself. Just as we have no word that expresses the unity of day and night, the unity of life and death is not easily expressible. But as Michel Foucault has shown, drawing from the nineteenth-century anatomist Xavier Bichat, death is dispersed within life, and life is usefully understood as the set of dynamic functions that resists the death intrinsic to it. As Leonard Lawlor astutely underlines, Foucault

emphasized the permeability of life by death and the co-extensivity of life and death.[10] For just as surely as almost all life shares the Krebs cycle and DNA, all life forms possess the ability to die, and we are misled by the very word life into ignoring the presence of death in life, just as the word "day" makes it impossible to think of the night as constitutive of it.

In this book, I shall be interested primarily not in the biological but the cultural and political significance of life or death-in-life. If biological life indeed consists in the sum of functions that resists death, cultural vitalism has been the name for a volatile set of doctrines that resists the petrifaction of social forms and personalities in the name of more of this unfathomable life and urges a return to raw, unverbalized lived experience through the bracketing of the sedimented categories and schema by which we reflect on and "deaden" it. Vitalism has combined cultural critique and phenomenology in complex and contradictory ways.

* * * * *

The category of life was pivotal to the visions of some of modernity's greatest cultural theorists—Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and Georg Simmel. The cultural importance of vitalism to modernism has certainly not gone unnoticed. Among the more important studies have been Sanford Schwartz's *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth-Century Thought*, Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass's edited collection *The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy*, Herbert Schnädelbach's *Philosophy in Germany, 1831–1933*, and Mark Antliff's *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde*. Vitalism has also enjoyed an afterlife not only in new works influenced by the early *Lebensphilosophs* but also in the visions of contemporary theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Negri, Giorgio Agamben, and Elizabeth Grosz.

While life has indeed proven reducible to a form of the organization of physicochemical matter, it has retained its cultural resonance and power. In the end, neither the scientific demystification of life nor the explosive emergence of the new technological and ecological questions about life has diminished the importance of the primal feeling of life to our culture. It should be remembered that scientific vitalism enjoyed validity until the early twentieth century, and it was based on the claim that life cannot be reduced to physicochemical matter and that the emergent properties of life and the ascending nature of living systems cannot be understood in terms of mechanis-

the modern state—the key moments in Hegel's triumphant narrative of the *Geist* before its finalization in the Prussian state—were all reevaluated, and different aspects of the past became important. For Negritude thinkers, Descartes' ascendance was considered the pivotal point. Descartes, with whom I begin the next chapter, was seen as the key figure in the emergence of the Western ideologies of mechanism and positivism that had led to the West's self-destruction. Rationality came to be understood as a narrow ideal that, far from being value free, valorized the assumptions of the technologist who aimed to master, control, and use matter.

This reconsideration of the West also ravaged the dialectical theory of history, which implied that past gains are preserved in the higher stages, so that no progress is lost and that progress is cumulative. Anything worth preserving is putatively sublated. The crisis of the West then led to both a revaluation of what had to be negatively dismissed because it had not been preserved and actual study of all that had been ignored or left outside the march of progress. This provided colonial intellectuals with the confidence to embrace both vitalist philosophies discredited within the scientific West and their own real and imagined animist traditions. The Western avant garde had already come to understand its Other in terms of the very vitalist tropes that had proven resilient in the face of the advance of mechanical science: experimental ethnography and avant-garde movements critical of modernity's reach would locate the last vestiges of animism or an enchanted world in the cultural practices of Europe's periphery; indeed, only the non-Western subject was understood to possess the capacity to appreciate the creative life force at work at all levels, from the cosmos to nature to a speck of matter. Mathematical physics had devitalized the world, and Western rationality excused the nonimaginative confusion between animate and inanimate only in a child or primitive person. But the extirpation of animism from the understanding of the physical world was now understood as epistemological violence. The dominant forms of physicalist and reductionist understanding came into question, and the place to begin this revision—here Bergson resumed the teachings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge—was in realizing that our own consciousness and freedom could not in fact be understood "by an object language which was developed to deal literally with the natural" and lifeless world.[50] The crisis in Western self-confidence that reached its apogee in the interwar years had to lead back to what had been the often implicit foundation of the sense of civilizational superiority—the distrust in life as an ontological, explanatory, and cultural category.

tendencies—the dynamization of the racial spirit, the biologization of the will to power, and "deep holism" in the understanding of historical forms.

The fourth chapter is a study of the poetics of life in the *Négritude* movement. By stressing, even at the risk of overemphasizing, the importance of Bergson to Senghor and Aimé Césaire, I am able to clarify and criticize their vitalist commitments. Bergson's influence was emphasized by both leaders of *Négritude*. The recovery of racial memory played on the dynamics of *duration*, Bergson's key idea; the search for racial authenticity drew on the idea of *the fundamental self*, whose recovery was central to Bergson's theory of freedom; the search for experiential modes suited to the magically real, immanent in the lived experience of the Americas was based on Bergson's *critique of the intellect*; and the figure of the poet came to replace that of the *mystic* at the center of his ethical theory. It is indeed paradoxical that colonial writers would forge weapons out of the "arsenal" of this vitalist form of European irrationalism. However, in judging their achievement, we must have a thorough understanding of their history and of the resilience of the ideas they transformed.

The perceived imminent death of the West also played an important part in the development by colonial artists of life philosophy. To see the importance of that perceived death, a simple point about historical narrative should be underscored in closing this introduction. If we evaluate the past from the standpoint of the present and if we look at the past to understand what it contributed to the extant, then as the present changes our view of the past changes: different aspects of it become important. Thus—and this is the point—the writing of an absolute history requires that history has come to an end: "The logical point here could be compared with the more dramatic but essentially similar point made by Dilthey, Heidegger and Sartre about the significance of death within the life of the individual. It is only at death, when the possibility of future action for an individual is foreclosed, that we are able to begin to give final significance to what he has done in life."[49]

For the colonial intellectuals, there was confidence that the history of the West could be finally written because it had come to an end, not in the eternal present of the Hegelian triumph but in suicidal despair, not in spite of but because of the very achievements of the Hegelian *Geist*. Indeed, those features, those moments that had contributed to this specific ending, now became those aspects of the past seen in historiography. The emergence of the individual in the Greek polis, the Reformation, the creation of

tic or quantitative science modeled on the operation of machines or Newtonian physics. Often strengthened by such assertions of the irreducibility or autonomy of life, cultural vitalism has had at least three enduring dimensions: life is made a tribunal before which cultural and political forms are judged as to whether they serve or frustrate it; vitalism demands a new kind of realist, albeit antiscientific, epistemology or, in other words, the development of modes of perception through which life as it actually is can be known or intuited; and vitalism underwrites a personal ethics of the affirmation of, rather than resentment against or escapism from, life.

Life remains today a term of celebration and critique; it provides a perspective and is the basis of all perspective; life marks itself by gratuitous excess and can achieve itself through asceticism; it distinguishes itself through memory and recollection but strives for novelty and forgetting; it persists through metabolism but is identified with metamorphosis and ever greater plenitude of biological and cultural forms; it defies the laws of thermodynamics but cannot achieve the promise of immortality; it both singularizes itself in many lives and transcends them as one *élan vital*; it is identified with the unexpected as well as with the teleological.

Though I shall express criticism of vitalism throughout this book, there is no gainsaying that the real personal and cultural anxiety over a Medusean petrifaction or living death has been as much the source of cultural restlessness as Martin Heidegger's heroically tragic recognition of finitude.[11] As I speak to the controversy over vitalism, what I hope to add is a more sustained discussion of the complex, constitutive relation between vitalism and racialism, including here not only its anti-Semitic forms (and Mark Antliff's work has been most illuminating here) but also its defensive black forms. This book will attempt to remedy a racial gap in contemporary scholarship on life philosophies. The main argument of this book is that one cannot understand twentieth-century vitalism separately from its implication in racial and anti-Semitic discourses and that we cannot understand some of the dominant models of emancipation within black thought except through recourse to the vitalist tradition. I am therefore interested more in the relationship between the two discourses of vitalism and racialism than I am in specific authors whose respective bodies of work cannot be confined to either vitalism or racialism, much less the area in which the two overlap. I shall argue that racialism has been central to our culture and that this racialism has often been vitalist. I critically study the fabulation of the opposition between Gentile instinct and Jewish abstraction; assertions of the more

life-aware nature of black cultures by the *Négritude* poets; calls for a palingenetic ultranationalism, a kind of nationalist rebirth achieved through violence; and appeals to collective racial memory.

On the connection between memory and life, it is important to remember that the animate can be distinguished from the inanimate precisely by its mnemic force or ability to condense the past. In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, each birth came to be seen less like the engendering of a unique work of art and increasingly understood in terms of reproduction.[12] Once distinguished by its ability to reproduce, life could be defined as that which physically embodies a physical memory by means of which the present is bound to the past. Biology opened up the possibility of defining life in terms of memory, and the discovery of a deep ethnological past in the context of social Darwinian anthropology made it possible to speculate on the memories of racial groups. Life, memory, and race came to be joined in new politically charged and vitalist discourses of race. Yet my book is not only about race: not all that is objectionable about vitalism follows from its implication in racial discourses, and that vitalism has been implicated in racial discourses does not vitiate it. I have therefore attempted to rethink vitalism—even apart from its racial implications—to explain its full cultural context. In the end, I argue that *Négritude*'s grounding of black oppositional culture in vitalism needs to be handled much more critically than it has been by the critics who have noted the connection. At the least, I hope to show that some of the dominant models of emancipation within black thought cannot be understood except through recourse to the vitalist tradition.

The implication of vitalism in racist and anti-Semitic discourses may seem surprising. Vitalism has represented the refusal to reduce life to physicochemical reactions, but racial thinking, as James Watson has recently reminded us, depends on thinking of and reducing human group diversity to sadistically imagined physicochemical group differences. That is, modern race thinking seems to have depended on both the expulsion of life as an autonomous reality from scientific enquiry and on the definition of even the human being in terms of only physicochemical substance, the stuff of DNA. To the extent that it claims a spiritual essence to living beings or the existence of a vital principle, vitalism would seem to be irrelevant to racial discourse. I shall explore, however, the modes of implication of vitalism in racial and anti-Semitic discourses. In order to lay bare these relationships, I have also attempted in the first two chapters to achieve some analytical clarity as to what life philosophy has been, in part by clarifying just what exactly this essentially reactive discourse has been a protest against.

> The Belgian missionary Placide Tempels, for his part, discoursed on "Bantu philosophy," one of whose principles was, according to him, the symbiosis between "African man" and nature. In the good father's opinion, "vital force" constituted the Bantu man's very essence. This was deployed from a degree near to zero (death) to the ultimate level of those who turned out to be "chiefs." They, along with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, are indeed the main sources of Senghor's thought, who Henri Guaino [Sarkozy's speechwriter] endeavoured to mobilize in the effort to give the presidential discourse indigenous credentials. Is he not aware, then, of the inestimable debt that, in his formulation of the concept of negritude or in the formulation of his notions of culture, civilization and even cultural blending, the Senegalese poet owes the most racist, most essentialist and most biologizing theories of his time?[48]

The power that vitalism drew from and gave to racial and anti-Semitic discourses should make us, like Mbembe, wary of its contemporary forms and of the assumptions underlying postcolonial understandings of civilizational difference. Mine is ultimately a critical book, but I have also tried to understand what made vitalism attractive and the needs to which it spoke. This is therefore also a book that delves deeply into the history of vitalism rather than simply dismissing it as racist.

Vitalism was a rebellion against the scientism of the nineteenth century, and in the first chapter I show the many ways the vital was counterposed to mechanical forms of world disclosure and self-understanding. Even though these forms were many and their specific problems various, vitalist thinkers did not disambiguate the many kinds of "mechanism" against which they rebelled. The first chapter attempts to lend some analytical clarity here; it is a conceptual exercise. The second chapter shows that the forms of vitalism were just as varied, and I present a critical study of some of its major forms and of the criticisms to which they were subject.

The third chapter is devoted not only to overturning the image of Bergson as a metaphysician of change but also to showing how his thought—audacious, profound, and hugely influential—directed artistic and political minds alike to the edge of spiritualist nationalism and racialism. I show that modern concepts of race have in fact been defined around the axes of vitalism and organicism, and I try to provide new insight into the nature and underpinnings of racial thought, usually understood as only the expression of a vulgar, Darwinian materialism. I argue that the interwar concept of race expressed life mysticism as it incoherently concatenated three

published in 1974, shame or fear of being racist should not allow the West to deny "having been so at any time" and thus produce a situation in which "a vast chapter of Western thought is made to disappear by sleight of hand."[47]

My study of vitalism aims to throw new light on this legacy of Western thought. It is also important to underline a paradox at the heart of this book: that the very doctrine I criticize as racialist was in fact central at least formally to the aesthetic visions of many artists who had to create under the shadow of haughty European claims to supremacy. When the connection between European vitalism and the anticolonial writers of *Négritude* is noted, the reaction today is, quite rightly, often the condemnation of both movements. Witness, for example, the reaction to a recent, unconsciously vitalist presentation by the French president Nicolas Sarkozy to the faculty at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, Senegal, on July, 26, 2007. Sarkozy effused about the black personality, as essentialized by Leopold Sédar Senghor, as animist, vitalist, and emotional. Achille Mbembe, a theorist of postcolonialism, wrote a fiery rejoinder in which he lampooned Sarkozy's aspirations at ethnophilosophy and reminded readers of the sources of the thought of Senghor to whom Sarkozy had appealed. Mbembe's biography of ideas is masterful (only Bergson, the philosophical fount, is missing, as I shall show in my last chapter), and I quote Mbembe at length:

> [Lucien] Lévy Brühl attempted to construct a system out of this accumulation of prejudices in his reflections on "the primitive" or even "pre-logical mentality." In a collection of essays about "inferior societies" (*Mental Functions in Primitive Societies* in 1910; then *Primitive Mentality* in 1921), he strove to give pseudo-scientific backing to the distinction between a "western man" gifted with reason and non-western peoples and races trapped in the cycle of repetition and mythico-cyclical time.
>
> Presenting himself—a customary habit—as "the friend" of Africa, Leo Frobenius (whom the novelist Yambo Ouologuem virulently denounces in *Le Devoir de Violence*) widely contributed to spreading elements of Lévy Brühl's ruminations by highlighting the concept of African "vitalism." Granted, he didn't consider "African culture" the simple prelude to logic and rationality. In his eyes, nonetheless, the black man was, at the end of the day, a child. Like his contemporary Ludwig Klages (author, amongst other things, of *The Cosmogonic Eros*, *Man and the Land*, *The Spirit as Enemy of the Soul*), he considered that western man's excessive assertion of will—the formalism to which he owed his power over nature—had engendered a devitalization generating impersonal behaviour.

* * * * *

As this book will show, life has proven itself a banner and a tribunal, a call for cultural renewal and the basis of cultural critique, so that despite the dazzling new technologies of life, cultural vitalism still speaks to us. It needs underlining that modern cultural theory has centered on reassertions of Life. Yet there has been little in common between the various attempts to go beyond scientific concepts and everyday notions of life with a poetry or language or art that expresses life in its concreteness and abundance, and there has been little in common among the political movements that grounded themselves in life. Vitalism has, for example, been both biologistic and spiritualist, naturalist and theological. Just as life itself may be nothing other than a name for the various ways of living, vitalism may not have an essence but only be the name for the set of multiple doctrines and movements premised on life variously understood. Before I lay out the plan of this book, I first want to suggest here the polysemy of life.

The Romantics, M. H. Abrams argued, identified themselves and the world with organic life. With the Romantics, the call to life was a call to restore the imagination and creativity against the threat of mechanistic or associationist psychology, and the Romantics tried to return us to our intimate place in the throbbing and becoming superorganism. They insisted that the cosmos had been misinterpreted ever since Galileo and Newton in the metaphysical terms of "inert matter," "measure," "quantity," and "universal law." The great work of art was also marked by organic properties. In *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, Abrams insisted:

> Life is the premise and paradigm for what is innovative and distinctive in Romantic thinkers. Hence, their vitalism: the celebration of that which lives, moves, and evolves by an internal energy. . . . Hence [also] their organicism: the metaphorical translation into the categories and norms of intellection of the attributes of a growing thing, which unfolds its inner form and assimilates to itself alien elements, until it reaches the fullness of complex, organic unity.[13]

But later nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers called on different meanings of "life," which became embedded in twentieth-century discourse, and we will see their varied influences throughout the book. Karl Marx, for example, reversed the idealist relationship between consciousness and the

material processes. Commonly thought to have reversed the relationship between consciousness and this real life, Marx pointed to the centrality of the metabolic relationship between human society and environment as mediated by labor's use of nature's mechanical and chemical properties for its own purposes. Alternatively, Friedrich Nietzsche scorned the reduction of life to biological fitness, maximum reproduction, and the associated utilitarian ethic and wrote lyrically of a life that sacrificed self-preservation and the enmity of the resentful for the sake of creative transcendence. Henri Bergson captured the modernist imagination by combining life, memory, a layered self, and novelty. Inspired by Bergson, the French political provocateur Georges Sorel would deepen political disillusion with mechanistic and lifeless democracy, in which the sovereign abstract citizens are indifferent to one another and held together simply by an external mechanism. As Mark Antliff has recently shown, Sorel militated for disciplined, aestheticized violence for the sake of a palingenetic and organicist ultranationalism that promised to bring (at least Gentile) people together through intuitive, organic, and mutual sympathy.[14] Oswald Spengler, the early twentieth-century cultural sensation and author of the massive *The Decline of the West*, bloviated soon thereafter about the rights of blood and instinct against the power of money and intellect and their brethren philosophies of materialism and skepticism. Racial social Darwinists insisted that as the truth of living being is bio-logical, only physical race could sustain the social bond, and society was the theater of human animals' struggle of all against all and the domination of one group or subspecies over another. Of course, fascists were not content to refer just to the social-Darwinian "laws of life." To liberate life not only in a biological but also a spiritual sense, they thought it necessary to murder and destroy those who weakened life; the projection of a dystopian racial state was what the theorist of fascism Roger Griffin has called an active biopolitical project.[15]

Vitalism also encapsulated the shift in the nature of the critiques of capitalism. In the years leading to and following the Great War, the watershed event of modernity, the terms of cultural and social criticism were decisively changed, moving from Marx and Hegel to Bergson and Sorel, Nietzsche and Heidegger. If, to use Luc Boltanski's interesting categories, critics had once focused plaintively on the poverty among workers and inequalities to raise moral concerns about the opportunism and egoism of the marketplace through the contrast of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, critique decisively achieved a new register in these years. Here we find the consummation of radical conceptions of modernity as a source of disen-

that Bergson's mnemic vitalism is the opposite of the metaphysics of change that it is understood to be. When I embarked on this book, I was trying to understand modernist poetics in the colonial world, but I soon reached the interesting and unsettling conclusion that it was often a transposition of Bergsonian philosophy to the colonial context. I then learned that Abiola Irele had long ago argued that *Négritude* remains incomprehensible outside an understanding of its evaluation of what was living and dead in Bergson's philosophy.[45] Of all the forms of vitalism, past and present, *Négritude* has often been marginalized, even though it explored this form of thought to its most productive and exhilarating ends and crashed tragically on its limits.

I shall attempt to show how vitalism, especially as transformed by Bergson, was joined not only to European racism but also to the defensive racial forms of African and Caribbean self-understanding. As George Rousseau has emphasized, this racial dimension has often been neglected in intellectual histories of vitalism:

> The progression from Enlightenment vitalism and Darwinian evolution to the new nineteenth century social Darwinism and white man's burden places an entirely new light on the crisis of modernism . . . by suggesting that Bergsonian phenomenon as well as . . . philosophers of biology cannot be studied apart from their social contexts. In this sense, the rise of biology, the cults of vitalism, and the doctrines of racism endow modernism with contexts it can ill afford to ignore.[46]

Those contexts, not studied in Burwick and Douglass's pathbreaking volume on Bergson, are the subject of the second half of this book. In our attempts to salvage great works for our thankfully more politically correct times, we are often led to ignore how self-conscious of and self-identified with dubious ideas about race great thinkers were. The idea that racialism, especially of the crude biological variety, was constitutive in important ways (even if only in the form of necessary presupposition) of great works about the human condition and metaphysics has called forth a determined opposition ostensibly worried that such intellectual critique will make fashionable once again the third-worldism that, defined against Euro-American culture, had just resulted in Weatherman ditties for Pol Pot and Kim Il Sun. I think there is very little chance of such alignments by those now working in critical race theory. Moreover, as noted by Leon Poliakov in his introduction to *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas*,

The *Naturphilosopher* Friedrich von Schelling had developed a theory of forces, both positive (life as field) and negative (the determinate composition of individual bodies). Frederick Beiser provides a good sense of an aspect of this Romantic conception of life, which combined a quasi-occultist belief in invisible forces with quasi-scientific analogies:

> What are these positive and negative principles? The positive principle is nothing less than the universal *ether*, the world spirit itself, which is a universal medium spread throughout creation, penetrating every individual thing, both organic and inorganic. . . . The negative principle consists in the structure and chemical composition of each organic body, which is distinctive or characteristic of that body. While this positive principle is diffused throughout nature, it only animates those bodies that are capable of fully assimilating or appropriating it. There must be something about the chemical constitution of organic bodies, Schelling says, that makes them more apt to assimilate this vital principle than inorganic bodies. . . . He likens the action of the positive principle on living things to the action of magnetism or electricity. Just as magnetism and electricity are spread throughout nature, but only act on specific bodies capable of reacting to them, so life is extended throughout all of nature and only is assimilated by bodies that react to it.[44]

In *Children of Men*, life still proves itself the only antidote to nihilism and despair, the only worthy and beneficent god. But only determinate bodies can mysteriously assimilate it. In protecting the conduit of life, Theo stands apart from the state and the immigrant resistance, legal and illegal, white and black. Vitalism has lost none of its mystery and cultural power, its force as a form of and rival for theology.

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This book will trace the continuities and ellipses in the idea of vitalism that *Children of Men* dramatizes. Vitalism was certainly the rage in the early twentieth century, and Henri Bergson was its contemporary prophet. In this book, I explore the roots and consequences of early twentieth-century vitalism, which found its apogee in the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Bergson's vitalism receives the most sustained attention in this book, as his philosophy had central categorial importance to European aesthetics and social thought, including its disturbing racialism. It became clear to me

chantment and the inauthenticity of the kind of existence associated with it. We also find a focus on oppression rather than class antagonism and an appeal to the freedom, autonomy, and creativity of human beings to transcend in the name of life reified structures, impersonal mechanisms, mechanical responses, and even themselves.[16]

Devoting a chapter to *Lebensphilosophie* in his history of German philosophy, Herbert Schnädelbach powerfully brings out the irresistible force of life discourses in the early twentieth century:

> Life is a concept used in cultural conflict and a watchword, which was meant to signal the breakthrough to new shores. The banner of life led the attack on all that was dead and congealed, on a civilization which had become intellectualistic and anti-life, against a culture which was shackled by convention and hostile to life, and for a new sense of life, "authentic experiences"—in general for what was "authentic," for dynamism, creativity, immediacy, youth. "Life" was the slogan of the youth movement, of the *Jugendstil*, neo-Romanticism, educational reform and the biological and dynamic reform of life. The difference between what was dead and what was living came to be the criterion of cultural criticism, and everything traditional was summoned before "the tribunal of life" and examined to see whether it represented authentic life, whether it "served life," in Nietzsche's words, or inhibited and opposed it.[17]

Alain Badiou has also remarked that the twentieth century posed to itself as its central question whether it was the century of life or death. Nietzsche and Bergson, he argues, posed the "main ontological question which dominated the first years of the twentieth century—What is life?" And knowledge, Badiou claims, became "the intuition of the organic value of things," while the central normative question was formulated as follows: "What is the true life—what is it to truly live—with a life adequate to the organic intensity of living?" This question, he continues, "traverses the [twentieth] century, and it is intimately linked to the question of the new man, as prefigured by Nietzsche's overman." Badiou also notes, however, that this project of vital becoming is connected to "the unceasing burden of questions of race" in ways we do not yet recognize.

As I will show in detail, it was in the name of "life" that European racism was challenged from the colonies. The structuring influence of *Lebensphilosophie* is manifest in a violent way in the Sorelian politics of the early twentieth-century Peruvian radical José Carlos Mariátegui.[18] Speaking to

the colonial context in the interwar years, Michael Dash has noted that whereas in the nineteenth century national-identity movements spoke of progress, industry, and participation, the nationalist movements became "Rousseauesque in their reactions," especially against modern technology and the spirit of rationality, as they became implicated in "the horrors of World War I and North American expansionism." The politics of life inspired an invention of a radical, Caribbean poetics based on an "organicist dream of the union between man and nature."[19] The *Négritude* poets Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire defined colonial revolt by fusing the *Lebensphilosophs* with ethnography and surrealist experimentation. The core of their poetry, a mythical founding of a unified African people yet to be, was a deep feeling for and a deep conviction of the consanguinity of all forms of life, obliterated in modern consciousness by the positivist classificatory method focused on the empirical differences of things. But with this form of life mysticism they also inherited the political dangers of life philosophy.

As I attempt to explain the predominance of life philosophies on all sides of political contestation, I am building on and correcting a large of body of intellectual history and analysis. In *Bergson and Russian Modernism: 1900–1930*, Hilary Fink has analyzed the importance of vitalism in the development of post-Kantian aesthetic theory, which influenced Russian modernism from the Symbolists to the Theatre of the Absurd.[20] This tightly argued book ends with a provocative discussion of the political implications of vitalism for a post-Stalinist society; Fink argues that an aesthetic that foregrounds the unforeseeable creativity that is characteristic of life can only ease the transition away from a closed and planned society. Ernst Bloch, however, argued that Bergson's empty self-flourishing zest was that of the entrepreneur and that it acknowledged "no suffering, no power to change, no human depths and thus no constituent human spirit over life either." Without recognition of the possible independence of spirit from life, this vitalist "aestheticism of entrepreneurial zeal" would undermine any attempt at a rational organization of important elements of social life, casting the world into catastrophic anarchy in the name of breathless, unceasing creativity and life.[21] In fact, such debates go back to Bergson's own attempt as an official state philosopher to galvanize support in both France and the United States for his homeland in the Great War against a Germany he portrayed as mechanical and said had "always evoked a vision of rudeness, rigidity, of automatism."[22] Fink's book only underlines the continuing relevance of these old debates structured around the poles of creative irrationalism and rational (or totalitarian) planning, between *Lebensphi-*

birth. Yet humans are indeed the only sterile animals in this anti-Malthusian future. Infertility expresses ultimately a uniquely human affliction, nihilism. It is not surprising that animal spirits no longer course through only human spermatozoa and ova. That these resigned humans alone are infertile suggests that the movie is an allegory about human meaninglessness and not simply about the unintended consequences of modern technology.

Theo embodies this Schopenhauerian nihilism, an immobilizing pain about the absurdity, suffering, aimlessness, and finitude of life itself. At constant war, humanity feasts upon itself and people fight each other in their futile attempts at self-preservation. Childlessness has forced everyone to confront the fact that he or she too is fighting a losing battle against time and death. Theo carries at all times a flask of alcohol. He has fallen back in his everyday life on the expedient, ataraxia, the Stoic imperturbability of the spirit, based on a sense of the triviality of the world of the senses. Adorno defines ataraxia as "the deadening of all affects, just to be capable of living at all," which reflects the recognition of everything's utter meaninglessness and ultimate insignificance.[41] Or to put the point as Franz Rosenweig would have: Theo "steps outside of life. If living means dying, he prefers not to live. He chooses *death in life*. He escapes from the inevitability of death into *the paralysis of artificial death*."[42]

Except for his brief respites with his cartoonist friend Jasper, Theo, drunk and affectless, is never able to affirm existence—thoroughly uninspiring and hopeless as it is. Chance, however, allows him to find meaning through the affirmation of life when he is trusted to protect the first pregnant woman in decades. Life alone elevates Theo out of despair and nihilism; it provides him a superior force to which he may sacrifice his painful and finite existence, and his sacrifice allows him to achieve, as it were, immortality: the first child born in decades is to bear his name thanks to his heroic efforts in protecting the literally African Eve, a refugee. Life has incarnated itself in a mysteriously receptive body, the body of a black woman whose speech and comportment uniquely manifest genuine affect and lightness.

One is reminded here of some Romantic conceptions of life. In the late eighteenth century, magnetism and electricity were mysterious forces; the magnetic attraction between poles was so confounding as to cast doubt on the basic categories of pressure and thrust in a scientific worldview still grounded in mechanical philosophy. Electricity was understood as a psychic force, even the source of inspiration. In this context, it was conceptually adventurous to understand life itself as a force field that operates on and through those bodies that are chemically capable of reacting to life.[43]

> breeder that multiplies cells in all directions; I am an incubator and a carrier of vital and lethal viruses. I am mother-earth, the generator of the future.[38]

Here Spengler's imperial totem of the *Raubtier* (bird of prey) has been replaced by the poststructuralist totem of a she-wolf.

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The movie *Children of Men*, on the other hand, is a brilliant cultural barometer of other contemporary ideas about life and death, vitalism and necropolitics, and it brings into focus the specifically aesthetic and cultural use of life philosophies. The movie does not give expression to the Malthusian misanthropy of overpopulation checked by pestilence and war or classical eugenic fears of a declining Western population overrun by a growing immigrant population. Rather the whole human population has become infertile. England is graying, too, but dying in relative prosperity, so the rest of the world's peoples crash the gates only to be met by sadistic deportation cops. The refugees or "fugees" are indeed nothing other than Agamben's *homo sacer*, biologically alive but legally dead persons, situated in a limit zone between life and death, in which they are no longer anything but naked life and so can be killed without the commission of homicide.[39] The English state has "the capacity to establish the state of exception, to commit those stripped of the rights of bios to . . . zones, and to torture or kill those reduced to the status of *zoē* [bare life] free from the legal restraints that would designate that murder."[40] England is indeed founded on a thanatopolitics euphemized in the official slogan that "England alone soldiers on." Refugees are legally dead, and uncooperative citizens, such as the cartoonist Jasper's once-journalist wife who has been tortured, are reduced to a catatonic state, bare life whose euthanizing is ultimately humane.

Yet even the politically alive are among the living dead as well: as a conduit of life, all human persons are dead in this post-Malthusian future. Just why humanity has become infertile is pointedly unclear, but the protagonist Theo seems not to care, because humanity has made life not worth living anyway. Only a small sect—Hope for Humanity—strives to restore fertility or even understand its causes. The unknown cause for infertility seems not to be rooted in the seductions of a work-and-consume society, in the reduction of the rearing of children to the acquiring of other expensive discretionary consumer goods in a postagricultural age and in working women's calculations not to forgo opportunities for pregnancy and child-

losophie and Enlightenment reason. Indeed, the contemporary interest in network society as an emergent, autonomous, and lifelike form of organization that cannot be guided from the top down only echoes yesterday's vitalism.

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Life and death have been central to politics in ways to which traditional political theory remains blind, and they have their roots in the birth of modernity itself. A historian of vitalism, Foucault also stressed the political ambivalence of "Life." He emphasized that once life became the catchword for the critique of the social forms of modern societies whose new practice of governmentality centered on the taking charge of life by way of continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms, life was destined to become an oppositional political concept as well. Heinrich Heine had already written that

> Life is neither means nor end. Life is a right. Life desires to validate this right against the claims of petrifying death, against the past. This justification of life is Revolution. The elegiac indifference of historians and poets must not paralyze our energies when we are engaged in this enterprise. Nor must the romantic visions of those who promise us happiness in the future seduce us into sacrificing the interests of the present, the immediate struggle for the rights of man, the right to life itself.[23]

As Stathis Kouvelakis observes, Heine had simply declared that for "life to be a 'right' is to identify it with the irreducible necessity of taking sides in a struggle. It is also to defend an unconditional right that corresponds not to a rationally grounded categorical imperative but to the fact that certain realities are subjectively intolerable."[24]

Foucault argued that as biopower was first accumulated in gross quantities by mercantilists[25] and then later qualified, measured, appraised, and hierarchized, life could then be taken "at face value and turned back against the system that was bent on controlling it":

> It was life more than the law that became the central issue of political struggles, even if the latter were formulated through affirmations concerning rights. The "right" to life, to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or "alienations," the "right" to rediscover what one is and all that one can be, this "right"—which the

> classical juridical system was utterly incapable of comprehending—was the political response to all those new procedures of power which did not derive, either, from the traditional right of sovereignty.[26]

Such revolutionary vitalism was ironically abandoned explicitly by Foucault in this very book, the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, for a preconscious *Lebensphilosophie* of bodily experience against the exercise of biopower, critically described by Habermas as "the form of sociation that does away with all forms of natural spontaneity and transforms the creaturely life as a whole into a substrate of empowerment." For Foucault, as Habermas notes, it is always "the body that is maltreated in torture and made into a showpiece of sovereign revenge; that is taken hold of in drill, resolved into mechanical forces and manipulated; that is objectified and monitored in the human sciences, even as it is stimulated in its desire and stripped naked."[27] Deleuze drew out the implications: "When power becomes biopower, resistance becomes the power of life, a vital power that cannot be restricted by species, nor by contexts and paths of such and such a diagram. The force that comes from outside, isn't it a certain form of Life, a kind of vitalism that acts as the culmination of Foucault? Isn't life precisely that capacity to resist force?"[28] While Foucault refigured *Lebensphilosophie* as an aesthetics of self-fashioning, Giorgio Agamben—as I discuss below—has traced how *Lebensphilosophie* endured a fatal inversion and became, in the forms of bare life and biopolitics, the foundation of twentieth-century totalitarian politics.

Yet Heine's vitalist legacy endures: Enrique Dussel, a leading Latin American exponent of the philosophy of liberation, insists that naked carnal subjectivity must be the material basis of all critique:

> Through the first Frankfurt School, we discovered "materiality" in the sense of living corporeality, a question that does not frequently interest those dealing with the theoretical positions of the School: "Whoever resigns himself to life without any rational reference to self-preservation would, according to the Enlightenment—and Protestantism—regress to prehistory." . . . Materiality, for the Frankfurt School, consists of an affirmation of living corporality [*sic*] (*Leiblichkeit*) as in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, which is vulnerable and has desires (Freud), and which needs food, clothing, and shelter (Feuerbach). This anthropological materiality, a far cry from Soviet dialectical materialism, was perceptibly close to our situation in an impoverished, starving, and suffering Latin America. In

> ethical values, the likes of which have never existed before. Politics is an invention, a labor of fabrication, of experimentation with the unrepeatable, and singular, that links it more to intuition, to artistic production and aesthetic discernment than to planning, policy, or the extrapolation of existing relations.[36]

As a radical or renegade discourse, vitalism represents protest, disillusion, and hope. Life often grounds opposition today, after the political disappearance of a subject/object of history and skepticism about the philosophy of the subject in general. Anterior to subjects and systems, this pseudosubject Life, Grosz argues, cannot be interpellated. A third way, Life disallows bourgeois stasis as certainly as it makes impossible the achievement of rational controls. In fine, Life conjures up experience, irrationality, and revolt.

In the work of Grosz, Braidotti, Deleuze, and Negri, we can see that "life" has become the watchword of today's extraparliamentary politics. Today, life is mobilized in resistance to biopower and anatomopolitics, the subsumption of capital, the market, and Empire. While bare life or the impersonal aspect of life is a denuded condition for some, it remains for others the force of creative destruction, destructive of creaturely and social forms in the name of more life. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri captured the global imagination by declaring the irreversible victory of the insubordination of life, the power of life against the power of order, suggesting that even in its dispossessed state living labor is already autonomous: "Our innovative and creative capacities are always greater than our productive labor—productive that is of capital. At this point we can recognize that biopolitical production is . . . always excessive with respect to the value that capital can extract from it because biopolitics can never capture all of life."[37]

As an indication of how little today's vitalism resembles Spengler's protofascist paeans to instinct and blood, Rosi Braidotti has rendered it lightly and even made it a parodic version of the interwar years' *Lebensphilosophie*:

> That in me which no longer identifies with the dominant categories of subjectivity, but which is not yet completely out of the cage of identity, runs with *zoē* [the generative vitality of non- or prehuman or animal life]. This rebellious component of my subject position, which is disidentified from phallogocentric premises, is related to my feminist consciousness of what it means to be an embodied female. As such, I am a she-wolf, a

hidden or at least foundational truth; the second Bush administration has left me struck by the centrality of incarceration policies, the continuing militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, the prison camps at Guantanamo, and the scandalous response to the disaster unleashed by Hurricane Katrina. Life remains, contra Rose, subject to a judgment of worth by the sovereign; those who can be reduced to bare life serve as not scapegoats per se but—as Césaire anticipated Agamben—liminal persons who with impunity can be tortured, killed, or allowed to die. Using the attack against illegal enemy combatants as a spearhead, the state legitimates the creation of external or interstitial spaces outside of the rule of—though paradoxically created by—the law, and it thereby prepares its totalitarian control of society as such. Bare life becomes the hidden truth of sovereignty in spite of the neoliberal project of privatization, deregulation, and risk assumption by private individuals. Our times seem to combine the strangely familiar—an old repressive biopower and necropolitics—with strangely unfamiliar biotechnology, to which the old categories of critique are indeed unsuited, as Rose has incisively and exhaustively shown. Today, an exuberant politics of life, based on a Promethean embrace of new technologies and the insubordination of life itself, is accompanied by an uncanny thanatopolitics and cultural anxieties about death and decline.

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I shall explore each side of this polarity about today's vitalism: on one side, the new subversive politics of life, and, on the other, the resurrection of themes of death and decline, especially as expressed in the recent film *Children of Men*. In the name of a new, postmodern, and vitalist materialism, Elizabeth Grosz has recently attempted to wean the radical politics of gender, race, and postcoloniality from social critique. True political radicalism does not promise progress "recognizable in present terms" but rather seeks to transform our wants and needs "in ways that we may not understand or control." She conceives radical politics not in terms of suffering and security but in terms of aestheticism and invention:

> It is an ongoing struggle, for it is the articulation of ways of living, an ongoing experiment in the attainment of maximal difference rather than the attainment of specific goals. It is art more than a science, a mode of intuition rather than reflection, dealing with bringing into existence new social relations, distributions of force, theoretical models, concepts, and

> the Southern Cone, the multitude of demonstrations shouted: "bread, peace, and work!" three necessities that refer strictly to life, to the reproduction of its corporeal content (*Leiblichkeit*).[29]

Horkheimer probably would not have accepted the postulation of life as a spontaneous power and a metaphysical entity that transcends every social determination, but Dussel does remind us, *pace* strong social constructionism, that the body is not simply infinitely elastic and whatever we wish to make of it. The living body makes its own demands and requires its own forms. It is not simply the inert ship that a person occupies as a pilot. In the context of underdevelopment, the enduring political valence of the life concept is hardly surprising. As Dussel further notes:

> It would not be possible for millions of human beings to maintain and expand communal life without institutions; this would represent an irrational return to the Paleolithic era. No. We are dealing with the "transformation" (what Marx called *Veränderung*) of those institutions which began as life-enhancing mediations but which have since become instruments of death, impediments to life, instruments of an exclusion which can be observed empirically in the cry arising from the pain of the oppressed, the ones suffering under unjust institutions. Such entropically repressive institutions exercise a power over their victims, whose power to posit their own mediations is negated, and who are thereby repressed.[30]

Yet on the other side of the North/South divide we also find a rather jejune postmodern body politics, of which Paul Rabinow has given a brilliant analysis on the basis of the distinction that Giorgio Agamben makes between *zoē* and *bios* at the beginning of his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.[31]

> The term life . . . encompasses too many things. In order to gain a renewed analytical vigour it needs to be unpacked. The work of Giorgio Agamben is helpful in that light. Agamben underscores the fact that the ancient Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the term "life." . . . Rather they had two semantically distinct terms: *zoē* and *bios*. The former referred to the simple fact of being alive and applied to all living beings (animals, men, and gods); whereas the latter term indicated the appropriate form given to a way of life of an individual and group. Philosophical discussion employed the term *bios*, since the status of life

> as brute existence was simply not a question worthy of extended or political reflection . . . the quality that sets men off from other living beings is found in their moral and legal community, in that supplement of political life, intimately linked to language that elevates humans above the level of animal existence. Sheer signs of life, or brute existence, that so concern us today in our ethical reflections on such issues as "brain death," would have been incomprehensible to the Greeks. . . . Life, today, is more *zoē* than *bios*; or, perhaps more accurately, many people are perfectly willing to attempt to reshape their *bios* in terms of *zoē*. The obsession with health, fitness, pre-natal diagnosis, life-sustaining systems, living wills, plastic surgery, evolutionary moralism—altruism—aggression, male bonding, gay genes, female relational capacities, Prozac, the child within, child abuse, cloning, diet, nutrition, etc., etc., etc., are indicators of that shift. Such efforts to give a form to the sheer vital dimensions of existence and to make that form a telos embodying and articulating the true, the good, and the beautiful, is nothing if not pathetic.[32]

Concerned with the ancient Roman persona of *homo sacer*, a sacralized figure whose homicide was nonetheless (and paradoxically) unpunishable, and his resurrection in the biopolitics of totalitarian regimes, Agamben in this riveting work does not, however, explore this kind of body politics in what he does recognize as hedonistic capitalism (Rabinow's reflections are thus quite illuminating). Of the *homo sacer*, on which Agamben is focused, I am reminded, however, of Aimé Césaire's identification as early in 1939 in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* with bare life, which is put in state of exception and exposed to sovereign control:

> As there are hyena-men and panther-men, I would be a jew-
> Man
> a Kaffir-man
> a Hindu-man-from-Calcutta
> a Harlem-man-who-doesn't vote
> the famine-man, the insult-man, the torture-man you can grab
> anytime, beat up, kill-no joke, kill—without having to ac-
> count to anyone, without having to make excuses to anyone
> a jew-man
> a pogrom-man
> a puppy
> a beggar[33]

Both Foucault and Agamben focused on the paradox of how a politics of life comes so often to imply a politics of death. If life remains a political term, so too does death. Yet why was the thanatopolitics implied by vitalism inherently racial in character? Drawing out the implications and tensions in Foucault's biopolitics, Roberto Esposito has recently argued that the immunitary paradigm is what connects life and race as well as biopolitics and thanatopolitics:

> In order for life's biological substance to be intensified, life must be marked with an unyielding distinction that sets it against itself: life against life, or more severely, the life of one against the non-life of others. . . . Not only is life to be protected from the contagion of death, but death is to be made the mechanism for life's contrastive reproduction. The reference to the elimination of parasitic and degenerative species comes up again in all its crudeness. . . . That it concerns refusing to practice medicine on the incurable, indeed eliminating them, directly; of impeding the procreation of unsuccessful biological types; or of urging those suffering from irreversibly hereditary traits to commit suicide—all of this can be interpreted as an atrocious link in the gallery of horrors running from the eugenics of the nineteenth century to the extermination camps of the twentieth. . . . Race and life are synonymous to the degree in which the first immunizes the second with regard to the poisons that threaten it. Born from the struggle of cells against infectious bacteria, life is now defended by the state against every possible contamination. Racial hygiene is the immunitary therapy that aims at preventing or extirpating the pathological agents that jeopardize the biological quality of future generations.[34]

And while we hear the use of immunitary metaphor in the discourse about immigration, it also has an anachronistic feel to it, and the suspicion is raised that the antiracist critiques of life politics are blinding us to its new dimensions. And, indeed, in his careful claims for the epochal significance of the new biotechnologies and emergent forms of life, Nikolas Rose takes issue with Foucault's (as well as Agamben's) putatively dated ideas about thanatopolitics and argues that "exclusion and elimination are [not] the hidden truth or ultimate guarantee of contemporary biopolitics." Rose also suggests that "in contemporary political economies of vitality, to let die is not to make die."[35] While I agree with Rose that Agamben's own explanations are often allusive or metaphysical (in the sense of ahistorical) and at times overwrought, I am not so sure that thanatopolitics has not a