

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Michael Dillon**, *Biopolitics of Security: A Political Analytic of Finitude*, New York: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-415-48433-6 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-415-48432-9 (cloth)

## Life After Foucault

No two books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would leave a greater initial impression than Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (2004) *A Thousand Plateaus* and Frantz Fanon's (2001) *The Wretched of the Earth*. Along with the intellectually challenging nature of their content, what proved particularly compelling about each of these texts were the lessons they offered in terms of the way the textual form of the books functioned. *A Thousand Plateaus* represented a remarkable attempt to write a book without actually being a book in any formal recognition of the word. There is no clear sense of beginning or end. It defied the logic of structure. The results proved as liberating as they proved to be unsettling for those who preferred to police the wisdom of rehearsed orthodoxy. *The Wretched of the Earth* showed how the addition of a simple preface or introduction profoundly shaped the interpretative meaning of a text. While Fanon's powerful text undoubtedly remains open to multiple interpretations, Jean-Paul Sartre's commentary encouraged a very specific gaze that had lasting effects in terms of its meaning and significance.

It is important to keep these two lessons in mind when engaging Michael Dillon's latest volume, *Biopolitics of Security: A Political Analytic of Finitude*. Dillon is rightly recognised as one of the most important critical theorists working on the problematic of security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unlike many in the field of security studies who trumpet their claim to be "critical", only then to afford the concept more reverence, Dillon continues to probe the modern compulsion to "make secure" in order to reveal the hidden order of modern politics itself. Before dealing with the

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specifics of this text, the point that I want to make here is that even those familiar with Dillon's project would do well to read this book with a new angle of vision. Following on from the above, while new students will no doubt benefit greatly by simply reading the text sequentially, my advice to those who feel "already familiar" with the author's work is to consider reading the conclusion first, then the introduction as a means of re-framing what once appeared established. Adopting such an insurrectional move upon the text allows for a rethinking of the author's important and politically charged intellectual corpus of work.

This doesn't in anyway undermine the integrity of the book. On the contrary, while the text (as the title indicates) remains heavily indebted to Michel Foucault and his series of published lectures at the Collège de France (notably "*Society Must Be Defended*" [2003]; *Security Territory, Population* [2009]; and *The Birth of Biopolitics* [2010]), Dillon adopts a similar methodological move by re-engaging the biopolitics of security via a return to Foucault's (2002) *The Order of Things*. This is crucial as it permits a more nuanced engagement with the question of finitude, which after reading this book now appears so obvious in terms of any biopolitical mediation. As Dillon asks: "What was the finitude that Foucault was taking about? How did it matter politically? What relevance did finitude have to politics of security, in general, and to the biopolitics of security in particular?" (p.2).

The importance of this should not be underestimated. Not only does it demand the now familiar shift in the political referent from territoriality to the politics of life itself. It forces a step-back from this to demand a rethinking of the political through its temporal framing. For, as Dillon maintains, the problematisation of politics, government and rule is framed by the operationalisation of time (p.10). The book is therefore preoccupied with what Chapter 1 aptly titles "A Political Analytic of Finitude". Finitude in the modern form of a shifting appearance of life and its

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correlating modes of governance sharing a common realisation that all things must come to an end; the life of the species along with every single system of political power most certainly included. It is how this end is conceived which both informs the truth of power and the logics of political rule.

Central here to Dillon's analysis is the shift from earlier Christian regimes of power, and their framing of existence through "end of days" narratives premised on an understanding of finitude derived from their history of salvation, to successive crises in this very concept of rule (noted by Nietzsche as "the death of—a very particular Christian—God"). This finitude the author terms "soteriological finitude". By contrast, Dillon explains, the onset of modernity is to be understood positively as both the invention of life as a fundamental political category, along with the way this is overwritten by a new conception of time which the author terms "factual finitude". Here the contours of government change, as life appears to be mortally finite and yet infinitely capable. As Spinoza once declared, "we still don't know what a body can do". The temporal significance of this is pronounced, as Dillon writes, for if the task of modern politics is shaped by an ongoing concern with "an infinity of finite things" (p.11), then the allied response is an entirely different political imaginary which both posits a different order of time and in turn radically transforms governmental reasoning.

Dillon realises that when people engage Foucault's reading of the transformation of political reasoning from the 16<sup>th</sup> century on, they fail to give adequate attention to the way in which there was a corresponding transformation in the temporal order of things, and by virtue of this theological and temporal as well as governmental reasoning. Dillon begins to resource this new political analytic of finitude and its correlating temporalities of governance by applying a novel reading of the Baroque. Moving beyond familiar aesthetic periodisations of the Baroque so often

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presented in art and literature, Dillon identifies within the movement “a shifting field of emergence, formation and problematisation in which the problematic of politics, government and rule was cast in a novel and dynamic way, preoccupied with the manipulation of appearance” (p 2-3). Here, then, Foucault’s earlier insistence that until the advent of modernity “life didn’t exist” as a political category (inasmuch as it had no reason to continually prove its social value and worth) is given a more purposeful temporal expression. The modern compulsion to make life secure in fact only makes sense once this new conception of the finite is considered, as it allows us to properly excavate the ways in which foundational claims to security are informed by the insecure sediment of an open-ended existence.

Hence, for Dillon, this shift in the temporal ordering of things and its new relations to finitude proves crucial in addressing the genealogy of biopolitics. Here regimes of power emerge bereft of divine guarantees. As the displacement of soteriological time shifts the problem of rule onto the open fields of political possibility, shaped by its multiple and yet uncertain conceptions of an ending, along with modern state sovereignty, the biopolitics of security become one of the inevitable responses to a modern pathos whose source of lamentation is derived from the lack of certainty in this world.

These conceptual distinctions add new gloss to the digital and molecular updating of life that Dillon shrewdly addresses. As the book navigates through the changing ontological account of what it means to be a living thing, and the ways this impacts upon questions of security, economy, (un)insurable lives, truth, racism, war and terror, so the shift from a world of fixed values and variables gives way to unending states of emergency promulgated by the emergent characteristics of today’s radically interconnected lives preoccupied with continuous adaptation, transformation and change. Life on this terrain becomes infinitely more problematic on account of

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the fact that it appears exponentially more powerful and dangerous unto itself. We have become the source of our very (un)making. Indeed, it radicalises our very understanding of the historical present of biopolitics to provide some compelling interventions in terms of political theatricality, political theology and political violence.

Given the modern concern with the infinite and the way it demands a forced participation in a world that is both fated and haunted by the limits of its own finite qualities, for Dillon what is presented as the real in fact amounts to an “extraordinarily contrived world of artifice” (p.11). This is the drama of the modern condition, a *theatrum mundi* putting the human on permanent display for permanent use. Importantly, for Dillon, “[s]ince the transcendent has become immanently invested in the modern sovereign”, it becomes the case that “no world is allowed other than the world of political spectacle that he or she is condemned performatively to act out” (p.11). Modern politics as such is a mammoth exercise in the staging, organisation and management of uncertain performances, whose realm and order of appearance casts “the human self in terms of spectator, artificer and, ultimately also, mere disposable stuff” (p.5). What is more, since the advent of the Baroque as a temporal logic for rule re-problematizes the very idea of the prophets of truth such that there is “no natural law, or nature of natures, that specifies that spectators cannot become artificers, or that artificers may not in turn become spectators” (p.5), the sovereign, ironically, finds continuous re-entry into the bodies of the living via a biopolitical mandate that admits to suffering from an impotency derived of its own vulnerabilities. Security thus becomes the mask of mastery for a system of rule that is haunted by the problem of time and the realisation of life’s mortal condition, as it appears to be factually finite.

Crucially, for Dillon, while the biopolitics of security takes metaphysical leave

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from the earlier theological paradigm of sovereignty that became so central to Carl Schmitt, for the biopolitical to take hold, it too needs to appeal to something greater than some base-level species existence. The biopolitics of security also reveals a distinct onto-theology that is essential if it is to continually appeal to the need for exercising “infinite government over the infinity of finite things” (p.9). What we encounter here is an eschatological break from the history of salvation as new and more immanent forms of divine intervention reveal something of the *katechontic* (as theorised by Schmitt and others, relating to the immanent task of restraining the coming of the end of the temporal order of things), which ironically, demanding an acceleration of the forces of chaos, in turn reveals novel and highly contradictory strategic interplays between religion, politics and economy that find purposeful contemporary expression through the general principles of formation for biopolitical rule. As Dillon explains:

What is called the modern age thus arose out of a complex series of transformations in the orders of both truth and rule, as did its religio-political politics of modernisation, security and development as well as its revised promises of spiritual and political salvation. Political modernity was therefore not a period waiting to be discovered. Modernisation and development, no less than security with which these are now also comprehensively linked, are not final states. Rather, their changing rules of truth and truths of rule are eschatologically and katechontically driven field of baroque formation in continuous experimentation with government and politics: battle spaces of fragile and shifting strategic alliances of complex surfaces of frictions within and between new confessions of truth as much as new formations of rule (p.141).

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But what is the order of this confession? Truth telling, as Foucault writes, is key to providing some concrete form to the contingent order of things. So if the truth of rule gives rise to the rule of truth, then for Dillon the truth of life's factual finitude gives rise to a new eschatological horizon that is less about secularisation than it is concerned with the politics of survival and the changing contours of the security terrain. As he explains:

Correlations of truth and rule thus constitute fields of formation, intervention and application which give rise to changing idiomatic (specific, historically contingent, spatio-temporally located) problematisations and strategic formations of politics, government and rule. These problematisations necessarily also presuppose changing problematisations of space and time, epochs of time and periodisations of history as well as of locations, both virtual and territorial, in which they take place, in addition to the technologies by which they are operationalised (p.144).

This is no mere sovereign exceptionalism and its ability to mark out clear demarcations between friends/enemies, inside/outside and times of war/times of peace. Indeed, as we shift from the death of God to the crises of the modern state and the advent of complexity, the contemporary truth of rule and rule of truth increasingly and violently confronts the shattering of all limit conditions such that politics is replaced by spectacle, and life, thrown into the world, is cast exclusively as if it were a matter of mere biological survival. Under which regime, irony of ironies, it increasingly threatens the survival of the species.

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Foucault was clear that the biopolitical maxim of “doing what is necessary out of life necessity” bequeathed its own strategic calculus of necessary killing. This is where Dillon’s project really comes into its own as the book both nuances and develops some of the ideas that were earlier presented in his co-authored book with Julian Reid, *The Liberal Way of War* (2009). Focusing here more on the violent oscillation between the tyrant and the martyr as the recurring embodiments of the sovereign who as mentioned is forever in crises (politically and morally), Dillon traces back his conceptual concerns to show how the lack of epistemic comfort once provided by the divine order of Christianity sets in place a violent pathology which is ultimately incapable of answering the question “How much killing is enough?”. Whilst humanity is borne of the violence that is carried out in its very name, it continually undermines any sense of moral limits as the juridical order of battle is superseded by the biopolitical calculus of necessary killing that can only wager more and more.

So where does this leave us? In the introduction to the book, Dillon intimates he has reached “an end” with this area of study. That seems to indicate that Foucault finally exhausts him. This is no bad thing. Dillon has provided a clinical autopsy on the body of Foucault’s biopolitical work that has done more than justice to his memory and legacy. Such an exhaustive condition does not imply laying Foucault to rest. And it certainly doesn’t mean mourning the passing of a conceptual persona whose time is being outlived. Being exhausted by the biopolitical embodiment of Foucault allows us instead to recognise certain finite qualities to his work so that we might also resurrect the infinite potentiality of his thought. Such a reversal is invariably at odds with the nature of modern security Dillon so meticulously interrogates. And rightly so! While, as Dillon shows, modern security takes the infinite to be the problem against which the very finitude of modern existence from



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top to bottom is incapable of resolving, the alternative does more than declare the already present death of biopolitics and its modes of subjectivication. It is to breathe new life into modes of subjectivity that are not content with having the human condition reduced to the level of some biological species stripped of those irreducible qualities that make life worth living. This text serves as a timely reminder of this. Indeed, if *Speech Begins After Death* (see Foucault 2013), maybe the lasting message of this book is that political life begins after the death of a once vital biopolitical Foucault, which is also to declare the already present death of liberalism. And for that reason alone it demands to be read widely.

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*February 2015*