

# Intimate revolt for a universal *polis*

—Lieta Marziali

*Zoē* and *bios*, functional bodily existence and organised political life, were never really opposites. They were not so in ancient Greek language (and, consequently, philosophy), where the words originated, but rather more aspects, or in fact stages, of being human. This aspirational idea of human progression has underpinned much of Western thinking, not only helping to create a division between mind and body but also attaching an aura of duty and morality to theoretical pursuits that would elevate the bare human body to the *to eu zēn*, or the state of living well of a superior philosophical and political being, supposedly for the benefit of the State, a *polis* fraught, however, with more exclusion than unity.

Rousseau had already seen problems with this, denouncing how the progressive departure of human beings from their

natural state had only contributed towards the perfection of the individual at the demise of the entire species. The veiled individualism and the overtly exclusionary nature of this superior political life will in fact develop the State-*polis* into the very controlling, self-serving and wealth-driven apparatus that Aristotle had instead so scorned in his *Politics*. What is more, if since Western classical tradition the implication has been that humans needed to aim to “direct” their bare *zoē* towards *bios*, time tells us now that this process has in fact created a ticking bomb that jeopardises that very *zoē*, our ability to even just be bodies on the planet we call home.

It is telling that most (re)appraisals of the idea of *bare life* / *nuda vita* of the last 100 or so years have originated in, and centred their arguments on, the increasing and incessant politicization of *zoē* by the State-*polis*. From Benjamin to Arendt, from Foucault to Agamben, from Merleau-Ponty to Derrida, from Butler to Kristeva, from Latour to Bennet (see suggested reading), it is the voices of resistance to ever new and pervasive power structures that have spurred an analysis of what it is to be living in the new era of biopolitics, in which governmental strategies are shifted from the management of the *polis* to the management of the population, the physical beings that constitute it.

On the one hand, the State and the power structures and strategies connected to it (such as the manipulation of the media and the shaping and monetisation of freedoms, but also those deemed to progress or protect the population, such as educational and healthcare systems and the police, all combined with such rewarding tactics that the individual self subjects itself voluntarily to the machinations of power) have infiltrated the “home” and control every aspect of *bare life*. On the other, globalisation has meant that the entire planet is now our “home”,

both in terms of physical reach and, crucially, in terms of the responsibility of maintaining its viability as a home.

The greed of anthropocentric rule has slowly and inexorably exploded into the totalitarianism of the neoliberal system, where we live in what Agamben calls a permanent state of “exception” (that is the State’s ability to opportunistically suspend its own system of law to protect its power status), and in which we are all in fact no more than *bare lives*. Furthermore, the excruciating inequality of distribution and pace of such rule has created an additional hierarchical system of exclusion by which, even among *bare lives*, most lives (especially those in the wider sphere of relative “otherness”) are even *barer* than others.

As a species, in fact, we are abnormally (and intersectionally so, across the various categories of superiority the power structures have helped to create, including location, ethnicity, class, gender, education, faith) divided between those who exercise their biopolitical power and those who are subjected to it. Furthermore, even as critical individuals, we often experience a state of disassociation, silently assimilating, wielding and capitalising on the same power strategies within our personal sphere, at once mistaking and accepting personal benefit for common (with more than a pinch of salt!) Aristotelian “living well” and denying our stake in our collective responsibility. This is none the more evident than when it comes to exercising power over other species and the very environment that sustains them.

If it is its perceived supremacy over both the animate and inanimate that the human species has exploited to elevate itself above all else under the misguided and reckless pursuit of development, growth and progress at all (or at any?) costs, it

is also the tool that it must use in order to preserve its very ability to continue inhabiting the planet. In order to do this, it is crucial to accept that a future-proof eco-system (*oikos-sistema*, literally the standing together firmly of the house) presupposes a most rapid and full abdication of centuries of rampant anthropocentrism, perpetuated and exacerbated by the so-called progress of humanism and the Enlightenment with their championing of a unique (and superior) human nature and of the (human) individual. This calls urgently for new economies (*oikos-nomos*, “house laws”, but also, and very interestingly so and not just linguistically speaking, “house heads”) and new ecologies (*oikos-logos*, house discourse, study): new power structures that will relinquish the supremacy of the human species and reassess its position not as dominant components but as bare co-agents in the global *polis*.

Jewellery as a form of art has the ability to help redress the agency balance between animate and inanimate not only through the dialogical and critical collaboration of maker and materials but also through the powerful and relational co-agency of object and body. In 'Nuda Vita', the artists highlight the *nudity* of the human body – at its most physical, spatial and experiential – as a catalyst for a new discourse where life is bare and political, where *zoē* is not a potential but as yet incomplete and wanting *bios*, but is *bios*. Makers and materials, objects and bodies co-hack the sanctioned superficial spectacle function of ornament to be passively worn and viewed, and transform it into a personal and most intimate act of resistance for an inclusive and truly universal *polis*.

*Lieta Marziali*

## SUGGESTED READING

When writing this essay I deliberately avoided specific references and quotations. What I wish to propose is instead a chronological reading list. I propose here a chronological reading list by year of writing in its original language. For the earlier texts up to Foucault, several editions are available, often also online.

- Aristotle - Politics (4th century BCE)
- Rousseau, J-J - Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality (1755)  
- The Social Contract (1762)
- Benjamin, W - Critique of Violence (1921)
- Merleau-Ponty, M - Phenomenology of Perception (1945)  
- The Visible and the Invisible (1964, post mortem)  
- Nature (lectures at the College de France 1956-60)
- Arendt, H - The Human Condition (1958)
- Debord, G - Society of the Spectacle (1967)
- Foucault, M - Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison (1975)  
- History of Sexuality (especially Vol. I, 1976)  
- Society Must Be Defended (1976)
- Agamben, G - Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1995), Stanford University Press (1998)  
- Nudities (2009), Stanford University Press (2011)
- Kristeva, J - The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt (1996), Columbia University Press (2000)  
- Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis (2001), Columbia University Press (2019)
- Butler, J - Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence (2004), Verso
- Latour, B - Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (2005), Oxford University Press
- Derrida, J - The Animal That Therefore I Am (2006), Fordham University Press (2008)
- Oliver, K - Animal Lessons: How They Teach Us To Be Human (2009), Columbia University Press  
- Earth & World: Philosophy After the Apollo Missions (2015), Columbia University Press  
- Response Ethics (2018), Rowman & Littlefield International
- Hansen, S K - Zoe, Bios and the Language of Biopower (2010), PhD thesis, Vanderbilt University (Tennessee)
- Bennett, J - Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things (2010), Duke University Press