

Resistance Is Not Futile:

The Defiance of Destructive Biopolitical Rule in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and George
Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

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Bachelor's Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University

24 January 2020

Abstract:

Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are among the most popular dystopian novels from the first half of the 20th century. Both narratives revolve around protagonists that are caught up in authoritarian systems that dehumanise and desubjectivize the individual. The political systems that are represented show biopolitical elements that juxtapose living in the barest sense to living in communities. In this thesis, I engage with these biopolitical concepts and show how the protagonists withstand the desubjectivizing and deindividualizing processes that flow from this form of rule through different modes of resistance. Using the theory of immunization by Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, I show how both novels, in their own ways, respond to life outside the context of destructive biopolitical governance.

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Introduction

Modernity has propelled humanity into a rapid process of development that both felicitously adds to human life, but also further complicates it. Economic prosperity, global politics, ecological awareness and proxy warfare are all examples of phenomena that are characteristic of collectivising processes that centralise communities and the relations between them. As a result of this, attention has diverted from facilitating opportunities for personal growth and individual meaning. Therefore, due to the high complexity and technicality of modern political systems, focus has shifted from the arrangement and organisation of our direct material environment, to the overarching, politically defined processes that address materiality indirectly. Christopher Breu, for example, proposes a radically new way of thinking about the relationship between language, theory and materiality, showing that theorising materiality is fundamentally inadequate, but necessarily contradictory, since linguistic descriptions will never satisfactorily do justice to the materiality of objects (4). In much the same way, political interpretations of humanity's biology are equally inadequate, as it is "materiality ... that resists integration with the world of biopolitical control" (4). The political is here understood as a technology that organises human interrelations in our world along legislative, cultural, moral and biological parameters. The biological is to be understood as humankind's immediate material, physical and organic reality; the way our bodies are organically constituted by nature. Biopolitics is the result of the reconciliation between natural and political life, a technology that conceives the human species as a coherent whole that has to be governed collectively. An example of biopolitics in practice is state intervention with regards to obliging child vaccinations. On the one side, individuals have the legal freedom to decide for themselves whether to vaccinate their children. On the other hand, the state is responsible for protecting vaccination coverage to ensure public

sanity. In analysing political problems of the sort, questions regarding the limits of political rule with regards to a profoundly interwoven public, private and collective sphere arise.

Limitations to discussions about the relation between legal rights and biology in the public sphere demand an alternative way of communicating that is not determinedly political, and literature suits perfectly the role of unaffected breeding ground for the dissemination of critical ideas. Fictional representations allow the individual to rethink the naturalness of their direct environment, and to resituate themselves corporeally within frames that are constituted by political notions and categories that oft remain largely unattested. Due to their intricate alignment, thinking politics and biology separately necessitates a new framework that effectively critiques the twofold structure of the logic of biopolitics. The twofoldness of the concept was first exposed by Michel Foucault, who addressed the legal paradox that should life be able to resist sovereign power, how do we explain that the biopolitics that is implied risks fluidly reversing into a politics of death, as was the case, for example, with Nazism during the Second World War (*Society* 262-263). Two works of literature that profoundly address the overlap of biological and political life are Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1921 novel *We* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, first published in 1949. *We* describes society after 200 years of war, in which the residual 0,2% of the entire world's population is ruled by OneState's authoritarian, communitarian system that treats its inhabitants as "one body with a million hands" (Zamyatin 13). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* conceives of an irrevocably ruptured earth where Airstrip One's (formerly London) inhabitants are carefully monitored through telescreens that provide a non-stop outlook on individual life in the private sphere (Orwell 2). Deviants that defy biological norms set by Oceania's The Party are met with reprimands and reconditioned, as their dissidence detrimentally schemes against the politically defined labour processes that sustain Oceania's military advantage over the other two continents. Highly

exclusive cases of dissidence in *We*'s OneState are similarly suppressed, the perpetrators being “dissolved” into “puddle[s] of chemically pure water” (Zamyatin 48).

Both regimes thrive on structures of oppression by conflating political subjects to a solidary, unified body politic in which a focus on individual contribution to collective labour productivity, suspension of sexual freedom and limitations of social and physical mobility are assumed to establish collective stability. OneState and The Party reduce individuality by means of categorical thinking, i.e. by characterising sanity as normative and in line with dominant ideology, and equating illness with political dissidence. In this thesis, I scrutinise what modes of resistance are envisioned in *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and how, through these modes, the protagonists aim to escape the negative aspects of biopolitical governance. In so doing, I mainly draw on contemporary Italian political theorist and philosopher Roberto Esposito's theory of immunization, a theory that is used both in legal and medical discourse that points at the bivalence of the individual's discursive objectification in resisting exterior influence in the form of threats.

Immunization is that process by which an organism protects itself from a viral threat by first injecting it into itself and then resisting its destructive potential (Esposito, *Bíos* 45). In a legal context, immunization is that process by which an individual disposes of “concrete obligations or responsibilities that under normal circumstances would bind one to others” (45). Because “immunity is the power to preserve life,” it is the linking duct between politics and life (46). However, since immunization as a personal affair aims to protect life, it can also destroy it by means of exclusion when the right to preservation is exteriorised and transposed, for example, to a sovereign political entity. Immunization is the “form of protection” that “subjects the organism to a condition that simultaneously negates or reduces its power to expand” because it aims to protect the organism by denying it certain freedoms, by virtue of its protection (46). How do *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* envision the

incongruence of biopolitics as a technology that contradictorily implies and allows a politics of death as supplementary to a politics of life? And what forms of resistance do these novels imagine in order to enervate the destructive potential of biopolitics' logical structure? These questions are central to my project and the answers proposed will be tested by contrasting the conceptions of this technology in both novels. Primarily, the focus will be on different conceptions of resistance in the form of childbirth and embodied processes of individuation.

An affirmative biopolitics centres around the production and safeguarding of natural life within the urban context against political power. It ensures protection of the individuals that constitute the body politic from external threats, diseases and the streamlining of biological processes that arose with modernity (Foucault 241). Its destructive counterpart is founded on the same premises, but functions by means of excluding the lives that are deemed threatening to the overall health of the community. The subjects in question can be both medically conceived as ill and thus a biological threat, or legally conceived as dissident and thus a political threat. Consequently, OneState uses techniques of power that are supplementary to the maximalisation of human life, killing dissidents that seem a threat to the attainment to this goal. The Party, however, pursues power as an end to which the life or death of individuals is only instrumental. These differences are significant because they are two sides of the same biopolitical coin. Both novels conceive of legally justified death and killing as methods of control that are employed to preserve humankind, in any communal form, as a species. To understand how this is rationalised, Roberto Esposito introduces the paradigm of immunization.

In this thesis I first give an overview of some of Esposito's key insights as a response to biopolitical concepts in *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In the second chapter I look at the exclusionary phenomenon of birth as a way to resist a form of immunization as implied by destructive biopolitics, arguing that as the primary extrapolation of life, birth is the process

by which a form of immunization that resists total dissolution of the individual into the collective can be instigated. Central to this interpretation are notions of spatiality and liminality, the former being a designator of spaces of possibility, the latter being a property of simultaneously being inside and outside ritual spaces. In the third chapter I look at the pathologisation of individuality in the novels through the lens of the biopolitical subject. I then argue that a recalibration of individuality within the communal frame is a necessary condition for an affirmative biopolitics to prevail and a destructive biopolitics to be overcome. In the concluding chapter I recapitulate my findings and propose an interpretive insight provided by the two novels that can be supplementary to Esposito's theory. Biopolitical theory has been comparatively anthropocentric, but Esposito's framework is receptive for a linkage with animal-human discussions. The addition of a profound ecological dimension can help sublimate this theory to become universal to the extent that it covers the ontologies of animal life, human *and* non-human, and inanimate materiality within the shared physical spaces of our world.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework

The main instigator of the present-day biopolitical discourse is French thinker Michel Foucault. In the final chapter of *Society Must be Defended* he argues that biopolitics “is a technology in which bodies are replaced by general biological processes” (249). This means that within a biopolitical system it is the entire population, humanity as a species, and not the individual *per se*, that is the primary object of governing. Unfortunately, according to Esposito, Foucault fails to deliver an answer to the paradox at the end of his work. How can biopolitics as a technology both prioritise the elongation of human life and rationalise killing in order to achieve this goal? And why do life and politics always indiscriminately seem to coincide? These questions point at the twofoldness of the logic of biopolitics. In reaction to this, Esposito introduces the paradigm of immunization that, according to Sherryl Vint, he uses “as a model to explain the reciprocal relations between self and community” (Vint 90). Esposito breaks with Foucault on one fundamental point, which is that Foucault implicitly suggests that biopolitics is doomed to take either an affirmative or destructive form, “the first ... a politics in the name of life and ... the second a life subjected to the command of politics” (*Bíos* 15). In the affirmative, the persistence of life succeeds to resist political power but risks dissolving the individual into the community, becoming radically deindividualised and desubjectivised. Moreover, in the destructive scenario, life as such is taken as the object of governing, which allows the reduction of the individual to a mere disposable essence beyond the political categories that distinguish the human being from other entities. The first scenario subordinates politics to life, the second superimposes politics onto life. To overcome this seemingly inevitable discontinuity, Esposito proposes immunization as a third possibility that binds “life and politics ... as the two constituent elements of a single, indivisible whole that assumes meaning from their interrelation” (45). Immunization, then, is

a “negative form of the protection of life” (Vint 91) that “subjects the organism to a condition that simultaneously negates or reduces its power to expand” (*Bíos* 46). This means that an individual that is in a reciprocal relationship with its community affects and is affected by the very community it is part of. Sherryl Vint argues that immunization “can fail in two directions, either subsuming the individual in the community or emphasizing individualism to an antisocial degree” (90).

At this point the juncture between protection by law through a monopoly on violence, and biological differentiation through negotiating the different modalities of life that are to be facilitated and protected, is obscured (Esposito *Bíos* 45). Attesting cemented political notions such as liberty, solidarity and humanity, is, says Esposito, contemporary thought’s obligation as it is in many of such largely uncriticised concepts that biopolitics has its origin, notions that “have been shaken and overturned” (11). A most telling example would be that of the ostensibly liberating effect of pre-emptive missile strikes that purport to protect the lives of innocent civilians, but also takes precisely those lives as a consequence of collateral damage. This incoherently rationalised rupture between waging the right to live and the necessity of some to die urges us “to think politics within the same form of life,” i.e. political life not as a form of life, but within the same ontological domain as natural life (12). Not doing so would result in an exemplary case of destructive biopolitics “as the social result of a determinate biological configuration” that is actually “the biological representation of a prior political decision” (120).

Drawing heavily on Nietzsche’s notion of “will to power,” Esposito argues that life falls victim to a project of destruction and denial of itself when its urge to dominate others, which inheres in every lifeform as an exteriorization of the internal struggle of organisms trying to overcome one another, is continued uninterrupted (87). Life always tries to overcome itself when it reaches its maximum potential reversing into what it tried to

overcome, namely its negative – death – by expanding; a collapse of life into death as a result of the excess vitality that it cannot dispose of (88). In other words, a self-ascribed dominant entity that invigorates its own invulnerability through its relational exertion of power tends often times to collapse and convert this external project inwardly into a destruction of itself and some of its constituent parts. Adhering to the immunitary paradigm and borrowing from Jacques Derrida, Esposito draws a parallel with autoimmune diseases, in which the organism recognises internal parts as exterior threats and thus starts attacking them, destructively breaking itself down in the process (Campbell xvii). A sovereign state that is so highly functional that it pretentiously holds unconditional (socio-political or economic) promises for its subjects risks falling victim to its own excesses and ends up inadvertently denying them the liberties and privileges it once presupposed to attain and ensure. This “confusion of the inside and the outside” is the result of biopolitics trying to protect life generally, by taking it in particular (Vint 94). A relevant example would again be the project of Nazism that implied the death of Jews and many other oppressed ethnic, sexual or, in their terms, otherwise ‘non-normative’ groups by virtue of protecting standardised and highly stylised Aryan-German life.

Immunization allows the individual to go past its personal boundaries and recognise the other as such in its otherness, without denying its right to live as an exponent of a biojuridical organisation that prioritises one ‘race,’ that is to say, one species over the other (Campbell xxxi). Immunization in the biopolitical sense concerns attacking what is other to preserve the community, and in biopolitics’ destructive scenario this is logically consistent with Foucault’s claim that the destructive potential of biopolitics is fundamentally grounded in racism, which purportedly legitimises the killing of other human beings by reducing them to biopolitical, categorical essences (*Society* 240). In this instance, immunization fails to offer a pragmatic solution to biopolitics destructive potential. Affirmative immunization in the

form of negative protection, however, aims at immunizing the community from its urge to project its notions of expanding life by means of negating the life of the other (Campbell xxxii). Subsequently, life must allow the reciprocal recognition of self and community in each other (Esposito 181). In this way, the community as an overarching structure covering both individual and other; body politic and sovereign nation-state; local and global community, can protect itself against its own destructive potential through the acknowledgement of shared lived experience, common spaces and a fundamentally shared life that exists *by virtue of* the significant relationships between all highly diverse entities that inhabit the same material world.

Finally, in further elaborating on the concept of immunization, Esposito draws heavily on the metaphor of childbirth. The child-mother relationship is the prime example of the complex entanglement of an outside and inside. When an exterior sperm fertilises an interior egg, this might result in the conception of a new living entity that is in causal relationship both with an inside allowing an outside to take form inside itself, and with an outside that has successfully permeated an inside without being rejected. The mother's body's immune system might initially recognise the new organism as hostile, but, if everything goes right, the immune system will accept it as part of itself, nurturing instead of killing it. Thus, immunity in the negative sense protects life by allowing it inside itself, whereas immunity in the positive sense protects life by resisting it elsewhere (Campbell xxxi). Ultimately, a new configuration of immunity allows us to reassess individuation as a process that defines the individual by concurrently extirpating the community's collectivising processes and allowing it to be defined by the political relations that are intrinsic to it (Esposito 181-182). Additionally, this suggests that individuation, when allowed to be executed along the interpretive lines just established, is successful where childbirth occurs unhampered and where the individual is defined within the parallel relationship with itself and its community.

Esposito opts for a “production of common spaces, spheres, and dimensions” resemblant of the Lockean idea of planet earth as a common good that allow the individual subject and community to coexist without threat, and this can only be reached by resisting the appropriating, immunizing and privatising effects that underlie a destructive biopolitics (*Community* 88-9). Both *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* envision societies where childbirth is heavily regimented and where individualism is entirely substituted with collectivism. In the following chapters, I analyse how and if both phenomena are conceived as successful modes of resistance that rely on the significant “confusion of the inside and the outside” that Esposito offers as a hermeneutical tool (Vint 94). In so doing, I focus on the twofoldness of resistance that exists in internal and external spaces of opportunity, as an exteriorisation in childbirth and an interiorization in processes of individuation. Ultimately, forms of resistance appropriate to this project subscribe to an affirmative biopolitics that departs from the logic of negative immunization, among which a rethinking of corporeal and material existence in the horizon of an as of yet largely unknown concept of the “common” are the first steps (*Community* 90).

Chapter 2

Birth as a Phenomenon of Resistance

In addressing the productive force of birth, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* provides the material that shows how a highly instrumentalised and regimented form of birth control colonises the individual body as a practical tool for state-purposes. Being entirely state-owned, the phenomenon of birth has its revolutionary potential in its detachment from this power relation, but the lack of provident spaces in Oceania disallow the possibility of birth to occur peripherally. *We*'s OneState has also fully appropriated the phenomenon of pregnancy and birth, but, contrary to Oceania, imagines spaces of possibility that do allow birth to occur outside the urban totalitarian-political context. The transgression of spatial boundaries is at the heart of this liminality, being in between set, ritual spaces and spaces of possibility. Liminality, then, is the factor that emancipates self-determination from forced subjugation within the urban setting, which is a seeming impossibility in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but an inevitability in *We*.

Esposito asserts that birth "is the effective site ... in which [a life] opens itself to the difference with itself according to a movement that in essence contradicts the immunitary logic of self-preservation" (*Bíos* 108). This dynamic, of an inside being in a profound relationship of mutual embracement with an outside, is particular not only to the individual body as a site of resistance, but also to the collective that is "naturally challenged, infiltrated, and hybridized by a diversity that isn't only external, but also internal" (108). In essence, this means that there is a fundamental destabilising reciprocity between individual and collective in which the one comes to define the other and *vice versa*. Because community implies immunity, and immunity is the mechanism with which an entity protects its life from a negation by the community, the necessity of the individual's existence for the community is presupposed, even in this negatory relationship. Moreover, this relationship is inherently

spatial, as it is within the shared living spaces of the community that it coincides and interacts with individuals, and in which entities that constitute the community interact with each other. Lastly, since individuals are concurrently within and without the communal, they are intrinsically liminal, *a priori* unbound to any set rituals that define the private, public or common sphere.

The potential of birth lies simultaneously outside and inside the confines of communal boundaries. Naturally, birth is the consequence of successful child conception as a result of sexual intercourse. But whereas sex as an act of revolt has been elaborately researched in both novels (Cf. e.g. Tirohl; Horan), I focus on the symbolic intensity and pragmatic limitations of childbirth. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, childbirth is so rigidly regimented that there is no space that allows it to occur without The Party's intervention or supervision. Winston and Julia's trips to alternative space, the countryside, are accompanied with a feeling of insecurity, as Winston wonders "whether there was ... a microphone hidden somewhere near," a feeling that only subsides when Julia confirms to have scrutinised the environment rigorously (Orwell 142). The Party's surveillance mechanism of control is so highly effective because of the concealed omnipresence and multi-layeredness of the apparatus, which is the reason, argues James Tyner in a Foucauldian reading of the novel, for the "completeness of surveillance at any specific place or time" (137). That even their highly infrequent visits to the rural are planned through "route[s] ... quite different from" previous ones points at the ubiquity of the parallel between spatial and socio-political structures (Orwell 146). Tyner further asserts that discipline is hierarchical, and that "[i]nequalities within spaces of discipline serve to mark individuals as privileged or not" (138). Consequently, the rural environment allows sex to take place, because it is primarily bodily and demands of the act that it is momentaneous, in which case the space can provide refuge. However, since birth is productive corporeally, longitudinal and marked by necessary

changes in the mother's bodily constitution, it cannot occur without Airstrip One's urban context, as the most minute changes in bodily function would be picked up by the telescreen, since even "[t]he smallest thing would give you away" (71). Marriage is the sole way to ensure the possibility of birth, but then its "only recognised purpose ... was to beget children for the service of the Party" (Orwell 75). As such, it is, as Katherine, Winston's ex-wife, impassively contends, merely a "duty to the Party" (77). At this point, the socio-political restrictions of birth become evident, and the impossibility of self-determined pregnancy is further exacerbated by O'Brien who exclaims authoritatively that The Party aims to take "[c]hildren ... from their mothers at birth," an endeavour that is consistent with the highly impersonal goal of substituting sex for artsem (or artificial insemination) altogether (306). Recapitulating Esposito's position on the mutual influence of the individual and the community, I argue that Winston's resistance and The Party's opposition to this are each other's bilateral, complementary *raison d'être*. However, his failure to reproduce this power relationship with Julia through conceiving a child, by being confined to their marked spaces as Party Members, parallels with the failure to reinforce birth, i.e. bringing a child into the world that is liminally defined by the interiorisation of Party doctrine, followed by a resistance thereof, and an exteriorisation of this act of defiance in the form of the child itself. Ultimately, Winston and Julia failed to materialise the process of negative immunization that aims to protect the lives they aimed to give meaning to.

In line with Esposito's proposition of the mutual influence between individual and community is Elizabeth Grosz' argument that the coming into being of the individual stands in a creationary relationship with the city in which s/he is situated (383). She further states that there is no real chronological or causal order between human consciousness and the establishment of cities, as a postulation thereof would imply a dichotomic distinction between nature and culture that is continuously upheld (384). She additionally asserts that "[t]he state

can let no body outside of its regulations” and that to resist this regulatory pressure “the body itself must shake free of this statist investment” (385). At the forefront is thus the mutual dependence of bodies and cities, without there being any form of primacy. Contrary to the situation in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, OneState in *We* does imagine a space that allows for redefinitions of inscriptions on the body. Surveillance in OneState is facilitated by the city’s glass architecture, which allows control to manifest itself “as a cultivated anxiety that one’s every action could be monitored by the authority, without any way to verify when you are being observed” (Eichholz 279). Outside the glass confines of the Green Wall, however, lies a space of possibility in which birth can occur unsupervised. Although throughout the novel D-503’s revolutionary attitude is mostly defined as an outward reaction to his sexual relationship with I-330, it is within his former partner O-90’s womb that the genuine expedient of political dissidence lies. Whereas her pregnancy was unplanned and a treacherous political act, it becomes the archetypal symbol of opportunity as it is in contradistinction with the fundamentally detached upbringing of children as proposed by OneState, and more directly in line with “the way the ancients treated their own personal children”: a natural form of procreation (Zamyatin 193). Re-establishing this severed connection with the profound natural dimension of childbirth, it is within the defiance of the highly impersonal dissociation of mother and child that O-90’s pregnancy gains its full significance. Their child is the product of D-503’s personal immunitary struggle of accepting his second primal other as partial and intrinsic to his rational self. Grosz finally argues that “the form, structure, and norms of the city seep into and affect all the other elements that go into the constitution of corporeality,” so the reconnection between D-503 and nature seem to rely on the same reciprocity and the child that is a product of this distorted psychophysical relationship becomes the epitome of the negative immunization characteristic of this dynamic (385). Consequently, the child embodies D-503’s liminality and his fundamentally disrupted

persona that is torn corporeally, psychologically and ideologically between different spaces of self and community. When one of the Mephi's members confronts D-503 with the information that the child is his and that O-90 "[is] there already, on the other side of the wall" and "will live," the child's disruptive potential is ossified (Zamyatin 194). Crucial is that it has been conceived within the Wall and will be born outside it, and that s/he will live as an exponent and successful result of the continuous struggle between OneState's highly rationalised and instrumentalised politics, and the bare biological life outside of the Wall, again "as the two constituent elements of a single, indivisible whole that assumes meaning from their interrelation" (*Bíos* 45).

In conclusion, The Party immunizes itself from Winston by having had his radical manifestation introjected unbridledly into their system so that his existence could later be erased by virtue of this significant relationship. *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* fairly anticlimactic dénouement is realised with Winston's highly predictable death after having been reduced to the state of bare existence, as he is "vaporized" and "considered to have never existed," reduced to the death in life he was predestined to live (Orwell 49). Still, Winston's life was not entirely futile, as his intrinsic drive to resist The Party's oppression is largely influenced by his mother's unconditional love that had more material and biological reality than Winston's love for Julia. His mother did not only provide him with life, she kept him alive at all costs, sacrificing that of her own, offering the "enveloping, protecting gesture" that is characteristic of a mother's genuine, and not state-owned, affection for their child (189). Although he fully, though involuntarily, surrenders to Big Brother at the end of the story, the metaphor of "the loving breast" in the last few lines of the novel conjures up the image of a caring mother figure that has withstood the psychophysical torture that brainwashed Winston, even when juxtaposed with The Party's authoritative figure (342). The result is a full circle – from his mother, to him, back to her – a cycle that gives precedence to the indispensable role

of childbirth for resisting an exclusionary form of immunization characteristic of a destructive biopolitics by producing exactly what The Party fervently tries to erase and negate, but in the process comes to be predetermined by it. By writing “for the future” and “the unborn,” Winston targets an audience that is implied not yet to be affected by any preconceived political inscriptions and thus able to thrive within a frame of existence that is primarily natural, and hopefully only secondarily conceived politically (9). Similarly, the mother’s womb and the nature beyond Green Wall in *We* figure as analogues of future productivity. Concludingly, D-503 righteously claims “that the spermatozoan is the most terrifying of all microbes” as it is within the very genetic foundation of human potential that political revolutions can be generated (Zamyatin 126). Both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *We* urge the reader to rethink their material and corporeal interrelation with their direct and indirect surroundings and they call for a reassessment of the possibilities that lie without the preconfigured parameters that are outlined in a biopolitical society by giving precedence to humankind’s material reality. In the next chapter, I argue that this is achieved through a process of individuation that allows as well as resists the collectivising principles of biopolitics.

Chapter 3

Pathologizing Individualism

Emancipation from Oppression Through Embodied Ideas of Self

In both *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the regimes look down condescendingly upon the significance of individualism and treat it as a highly intrusive form of curable disease. One way of thinking about individuality is that it is generated internally through bodily existence, and subsequently through external relations that come to further define it. For this reason, it is The Party and OneState's ultimate goal to reduce individuality's threat to collective wellbeing. Therefore, whereas I have shown in the previous chapter that spatial refuge is a precondition for birth to occur as an act of resistance against the colonisation of the body, it is within the persistent body as a site of resistance that individuality gains its full significance and structural meaning. D-503 and Winston's illness are in line with the immunitary paradigm, not only because their being 'diseased' is consistent with medical jargon, but also because they are considered a viral threat to the systems they are situated in. In other words, their disease is of the political kind because it has legal implications, and their individuality is therefore a form of resistance as it goes against the solidary collectivity that both systems imply. Although both protagonists finally subsume under their superior's rule, it is D-503 who succeeds to resist OneState and the Mephi's totalising practices by having inhibited two polar selves, a fact that is ossified in the manuscript he bequeaths to future generations. Winston's case is less successful, as it particular to The Party's methods that dissidents are controlled psychologically, then killed and ultimately erased historically, in that specific order.

D-503 first confirms his illness, the growing of a soul, when he catches himself dreaming, because in OneState, people "know that dreams point to a serious mental illness" (Zamyatin 33). Dreaming is intrinsically personal, and by allowing a dream to take full

significance, he authorises his own individuality to grow stronger than OneState's collectivity. He knows his illness is a political counteract and feels a growing anxiety to be exposed and get "caught like a dumb kid" after having failed to report his sickness to the Bureau of Guardians (Zamyatin 53). I-330 is his illness personified, as it is she who awakens his bestial second self against his will during their first sexual encounter, when she liberates D-503's natural self: "There were two me's. One me was the old one ... [t]he other used to just stick his hairy paws out of his shell, but now all of him came out" (57). From this point onwards, the disturbance of his use of pronouns, which was already instigated in the very beginning of the novel when he confuses "I" with "we," is commonplace, and his ambivalence to his own state of being becomes the eternal struggle of his watching his "own self tossing on the bed" (63). Having established a distinctive relationship between his rational, old self, and its "very dangerous" counterpart that is invigorated with a soul, his personal struggle becomes a political struggle. Michael D. Amey calls this a "double entendre," the simultaneity of his "medical condition" and the political resistance that follows from it (32). Either he chooses to resist his own resistance against OneState and turn himself in to be cured, or he allows his growing individuality to bloom in full potential as the apex of his political dissidence, the exteriorization of his formerly latent dissatisfaction with OneState's ways (Zamyatin 87). This push-and-pull process is analogous with immunization in the positive sense, as it is within his individuation that resistance to the inscriptions of biopolitics occur.

Revisiting the previous chapter, Esposito states that "[c]hildbirth isn't only an offer of life, but is the effective site in which a life makes itself two" (*Bíos* 108). In this way, the mother resists the desubjectivizing collectivisation of biopolitics in much the same way as D-503 resists being taken into either one of the two dominant discourses, that of OneState and the Mephi. Birth of the self, then, bears the same political potential as childbirth, since it is

with resisting his alphanumeric predication by developing a soul, by setting off his personal identity against that of others, that D-503 transgresses OneState's categorical boundaries. "[S]ick and not normal are the same thing," and because he acknowledges that sickness is coterminous with legal abnormality, his deviation from OneState's collective assembly in the "We" that it pretends to take form in is the ultimate political act (Zamyatin 126). Patrick Eichholz sets forth a similar argument and states that "D-503 gains a uniquely bifocal vision of each" of the two totalitarian powers at play in *We* (272). He furthermore asserts that, whereas the Mephi at first seem to symbolise a force of possibility and political detachment, they, and I-330 in particular, operate on the same basis of racial discrimination that Foucault takes to be characteristic to the workings of biopolitics (275). "Both remove the 'others' of their respective societies, isolating them against their will in an effort to inculcate the societal norms," and D-503's final abstinence of *choosing* to be dissolved in the collective and come to be defined by it, be it OneState or the Mephi, strengthens the dialectical force of his schizophrenia: his dual identity is the apotheosis of political counteraction (285). That he is eventually still lobotomised is a consequence of OneState's totalitarian practices, not of his affirmative compliance with their ways, and the narrative of his dual coming into being – the manuscript that is the novel – carries within it the political potential to instantiate the importance of individuality in the form of a self that is not predominantly bound to a particular political power. Having "been shaped by each of the novel's two power discourses" (285) D-503 recognises that to be operated upon would be "the same thing as killing [him]self – but" that "maybe that's the only way ... to be resurrected" (Zamyatin 218). Corporeality is arguably the individual's most acute reality – after all, *being* is often characterised in terms of physical existence – and it is within the context of the body that individuality gains its politically obstructive potential, its "meaningful action to construct and

maintain the boundaries for what may count as self and other in the crucial realms of the normal and the pathological” (Haraway 204).

Contrary to D-503’s conflicting dual nature, Winston’s normative deviation from The Party’s sanity prescriptions is presupposed in his character. Winston was never fond of The Party, but his dissatisfaction was always of the natural kind, whereas in D-503 it had to be induced externally by I-330. Rather than his individuality being a facet of his political disobedience, it is Winston’s dissidence that defines his individual identity. Naturally, for him to be conscious of The Party’s malpractices and oppose them is logically implied in accepting his individuality as something that is peculiar to him, which does not follow primarily from The Party’s ideology. After all, “they can’t get inside you,” he thinks (Orwell 192). Winston additionally believes that “[i]f you can *feel* that staying human is worthwhile ... you’ve beaten them” (192). The goal of his project is thus to be a sentient human being that recognises itself. Whereas D-503’s confusion exists in the self-recognition of his disease, Winston is pathologized externally, and where identity is of an ontological order in *We*, the psychology of dual identity is conceived as an epistemological phenomenon called doublethink in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In line with Esposito’s immunitary logic, Donna Haraway argues that “the immune system is a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of western biopolitics” (204). Winston is unable to resist the temptation of prioritising historical reality over The Party’s doublethink mechanism, and this founds the historicity of his individuality mainly in the faint memories he keeps of his mother and younger sister. His process of self-recognition is thus primarily historical, and not corporeal. The problem with linking his individualism to the facticity of history he tries to uphold and protect is that “[a]ll history was a palimpsest, scraped clean and reinscribed as often as was necessary” (Orwell 47). This coincides with Haraway’s claim that postmodern bodies “are not born; they are made,” meaning that Winston is able to *be* himself

because his identity is defined within the significant relationship of his dissidence towards The Party (Haraway 207). To argue this would also mean to say that the material-corporeal entity in which Winston's personality is incarnated is already predetermined by this relationship, yet "the body remain[s] a relatively unambiguous locus of identity, agency, labor, and hierarchicalized function" (Haraway 210). Winston's idealist vision of being able to resist The Party's methods of changing belief-systems is naïve, as both he and Julia fall victim to their highly optimised, technical methods of psychophysical torture. Since even Winston "loved Big Brother" in the end, his individuation as an act of resistance is terminated unsuccessfully (Orwell 342)

A shift in focus to corporeality rather than mere psychological identity opens up a new plane of possibilities. As such, ideas about corporeality draw the current discursive focus to the bodily domain. Naomi Jacobs argues that "[t]he problem of the body is central to utopian literature, which attempts to reconcile the desires of individual bodies with the needs of the body politic" (3). Both *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* address the problem of the protagonists' political dissent as a pathogenic that threatens the collective's functioning and their idealist, counterfactual conceptions of 'wellbeing.' But whereas Orwell's focus is on Winston's final detachment from his bodily self, the dissociation that occurs when he misrecognises himself in the mirror as "the body of a man of sixty, suffering from some malignant disease" points at the corporeality of individuality (Orwell 311). However, towards the end of the novel, one type of body remains relatively unscrutinised. Winston is the first to recognise that, "if there is hope ... it lies in the proles" (95). Whereas this is propagated as "a mystical truth and a palpable absurdity," there is some reality to the claim. It is usually Julia who is centralised as the main revolutionary female character, but her inability to bear a child stresses the lack of future possibilities for eventual offspring. Contrarily, it is the fertility and unremitting beauty of the prole mother's body that fascinates Winston tremendously (250).

Proles can have sex and produce children undisturbedly after all. Inner and Outer Party members, however, are too dangerous to leave unmonitored, so the main focus of surveillance is on Party members, rather than proles. O'Brien, the prominent Inner Party character, considers proles to be harmless, denies the possibility that they will ever revolt, yet it is the intrinsic humaneness that Winston rightfully ascribes to them that makes them fundamentally distinct from Party Members (300). Where O'Brien claims that Winston as an individual is only a cell, and that "the weariness of the cell is the vigour of the organism," he forgets an important aspect of the reality of Oceania's social structure, namely that roughly 80% of it is constituted by the proles (302). If proles are the only entities that remain innately human, and if we take The Party's equation of proles and animals as free beings to be true (83), then the fundamentally distinctive characteristic of human beings is that they have a corporeal reality, as carbon-based lifeforms, that puts them on the same pedestal as non-human animals. The particularity of the individual, then, has its manifestation in the communicative inscriptions that are realised biomedically and socio-politically, through the interrelations and hegemony of knowledge and power that define human existence (Haraway 212). Jacobs concludes by stating that "Orwell's conception of human potential to resist oppression is limited by an ultimately imbalanced notion of the powers of the body" (15). Thus, a tentative conclusion that could be drawn from both *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that the immediacy of their political message is not merely psychological or socio-political, but predominantly corporeal. Most importantly, in the context of the immediacy of corporeality, the novels show the dangers of humanity coming to the point of its own meticulous deconstruction – in activating its own autoimmune-system against itself – which urges a reassessment of the *value* of corporeal and material existence in relation to politics in order for peaceful coexistence to be ensured, an interpretation that Esposito would happily accept.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have proposed an answer to the question through what modes of resistance the protagonists in *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* aim to resist the negative implications of biopolitics. The main focus of this thesis was a scrutinization of elements of corporeality and individuality, as opposed to collectivity and instrumentality. Biopolitics shows to be a complex political technology that has both fruitful and destructive potential. However, in order for biopolitics to thrive as a politics of life, a way of governing is to be necessitated that thinks life and politics within the same ontological domain and approaches their hierarchical relation as horizontally based on the same teleology: The supplementation of living. I have argued that birth is a phenomenon of resistance that implicates spaces of opportunity in *We* beyond the Green Wall where the OneStaters do not venture, since it is O-90 and her child that successfully escape OneState's oppressive boundaries. Contrarily, since birth in Oceania is so highly instrumentalised that it has become a political mechanism, *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* hermetically sealed spaces urge us to rethink the relationship between governmental roles in the regulation and maintenance of demographics such as birth rate, birth control, child mortality on the one side, and self-determination and self-ownership on the other. Directly in line with questions that address the problematic of collective registration of highly privatised phenomena are questions about self and individuality, I have additionally tried to show that, whereas both novels show a pathologisation of self and idiosyncrasies, it is through developing individuality that the protagonists are able to resist the total dissolution of the individual into the collectivising processes that are characteristic of destructive biopolitics. This conclusion does not suggest that individuation has no place in an affirmative biopolitics. Rather, it proposes a reconfiguration of ideas about humanity and corporeality that can facilitate a new horizon of meaning in which the continuation of the human species as an object of government are repositioned, so that instead of being its nexus, it becomes a

partial aspect of individual life. Esposito proposes a new philosophical-political framework that does precisely this: Forefronting the immediacy and acuteness of shared materiality.

Because of the complexity, technicality and abstractedness of Esposito's theory, I have been selective and chose to highlight those parts of his argument that are directly relevant for my project. Consequently, I should remark that I have forced myself to abstain from a complete and holistic representation of his theory, which obviously does not fully do justice to its intricateness and logical structure. Additionally, there is an interpretative layer that is already implicitly present in his theory, which can be more elaborately explicated in future research. As the postmodern era has downed upon the entirety of our living environment – the earth and all its constituents – Esposito's theory should be expanded with a more profound ecological dimension that furthermore includes and addresses non-human animals and the inanimate materiality of our world more immediately and directly. Esposito's framework allows for such an addition, since part of his project exists in providing a new rendition of ontology that surpasses human categorical thinking and includes non-human (both living organic and inanimate) structures of meaning. One of the main problems of our postmodern world is the structural limitations of language in our description of and association with our direct natural environment. Future research could elaborate on the relation between language and materiality in *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as it is through language that the selves of the protagonists attain meaning, an interpretation that would be avoided in a radically new materialist approach.

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