

Globalization and Biopolitics

Introduction to New Left Review 45

A SELECTION OF the most pressing political questions of the moment might include the following: should women wear headscarves? May we buy and sell our bodily organs? How can we control the weather? The questions sound almost frivolous, and they are certainly not matters on which the canonical texts and traditions of political theory give much purchase. (What is a conservative position on the *hijab*? A socialist view of organ harvesting? A liberal policy on climate change?) That such issues should simultaneously be among the most debated of our time suggests a fundamental transformation in the landscape of politics.

The change is the result of technological advances that have enhanced our ability to travel, communicate and modify ourselves and our environment, yet the specifically political challenge posed by these developments comes from their global reach, and their widely differing impact on diverse populations. A few years ago, the issues arising from this transformation were routinely subsumed under the rubric of globalization, which, for both its proponents and detractors, hinged on the relationship between the global and the local. Now, many are considered biopolitical in the sense that they are produced through interactions of political power with the private and the corporeal. Almost imperceptibly, globalization has become biopolitics, the pivot between the two 9/11 and the global state of emergency known as 'the war on terror'.

The invitation to guest-edit a special issue of *New Left Review* offers the opportunity to explore the inter-relationships between these themes. Rather than allowing one to slide into the other, NLR 45 juxtaposes the two. Globalization and biopolitics need to be differentiated if we are to grasp the connections between them, and also to understand why the activism associated with the former has been transformed into the passivity characteristic of the latter.

Several of the articles that follow return to themes associated with globalization and its ambiguous import for human development. Though the 'war on terror' has had a devastating impact on participants and bystanders, for most people, as the sequence of articles by John Chalcraft, Sanjay Reddy and Kaushik Sunder Rajan reveals, the primary problem remains that of how to extract from the global economy the means to stay alive,

healthy and relatively autonomous. And, as 'Vectors of the Biopolitical' suggests, it is this practical project (as much as any state of exception) that draws people towards the public realm and makes life itself subject to the caprices of state and market.

Globalization collapses the distinction between public and private, and in the mutual interaction of nature and culture, private and public eventually dissolve as well. Sven Lütticken describes a world in which nature is transformed, while 'human culture is increasingly dominated by the new nature'; and the exchange between Clive Hamilton and George Monbiot highlights ways in which environmental feedback necessitates a politics that is at once more intimately personal and more globally consequential than any before.

Within the shadowy territory defined by the simultaneous interaction of public and private, nature and culture, new agents and forms of agency are becoming discernible. Jane Bennett sketches a public realm composed of 'a mortal assemblage of humans *and* nonhumans' in which agents work 'inside and alongside' one another. Chalcraft notes the role of what he suggestively calls 'fallen' agency, in which agents operate within the systems they seek to escape. One thread that emerges here is the idea that both globalization and biopolitics are coproductions—of opposing systems, incompatible objectives, agents animate and inanimate.

If climate change is the paradigmatic issue of the new politics, it is also a reminder that life is coproduced with death. Monbiot's suggestion that an airline steward should be sacrificed each time someone dies of hunger, and Hamilton's observation that for consumers solving climate change will mean experiencing a sort of death, are two sides of this; Reddy's meticulous analysis of diminishing gains in longevity in China another. The social equality potentially produced by 'the vectors of the biopolitical' is ultimately a matter of being equally alive and equally dead.