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Childhood, Biosocial Power, and the “Anthropological Machine”: Life as a Governable Process?

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Abstract

This article examines how childhood has become a strategy that answers to questions concerning the (un)governability of life. The analysis is organised around the concept of “biosocial power”, which is shown to be a particular zone of intensity within the wider field of bio-politics. To grasp this intensity it is necessary to attend to the place of imagination in staging biosocial strategies, i.e. the specific ways in which childhood is both an imaginary projection and a technical project, and to this end Agamben’s concept of the “anthropological machine” is used to examine how biosocial power has been assembled and deployed. The paper begins with the question of childhood as it was posed toward the end of the nineteenth century, focusing on how this positioned the figure of the child at the intersection of *zoē* and *bios*, animal and human, past and future. It ends with a discussion on how the current global obesity “epidemic” has transformed this one-time vision of mastery into a strategy of survival.

Introduction

When Giorgio Agamben wrote his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, he undertook the ambitious, even audacious, task of “completing” Michel Foucault’s work on power. The literature that has since grown around this book is perhaps testimony to the fact that the study of power is unlikely to reach a terminus, i.e. to be completed in the literal sense of tidying up any and all loose ends. More intriguing, there is shadowy supplement to *Homo Sacer*: an other figure that seems to co-habit the “thresholds” and

“zones of indistinction” that form the theoretical armature of Agamben’s exposition, and which offers a very particular way of examining the relation between *zoē* (“bare” or naked life) and *bios* (life which is “qualified”).¹ The figure in question is that of the child.

While not the focus of *Homo Sacer*, elsewhere Agamben has examined childhood as an “unstable signifier”.² Conceptualised in this way, childhood is a disruption between past and future, between death and life, nature and culture, animal and human – relations that appear dichotomous, but which are in fact “zones of indeterminacy”.³ It is through attempts to govern this indeterminacy that modern Western childhood has been constituted as a particular zone of intensity within the wider field of bio-politics, and to grasp this intensity – the way it is assembled and configured – it is necessary to attend to the centrality of the imagination in staging biopolitical strategies, that is, the ways in which childhood is deployed both as a technical *project* and as an imaginary *projection*.

This article examines how childhood is one important – and largely overlooked – way in which *zoē* entered into the realm of politics which, for both Agamben and Foucault, “constitutes the decisive event of modernity”⁴. The analysis begins with a specific apparatus – a technology of life – that was assembled at the turn of the twentieth century, and which takes the form of *biosocial power*. By biosocial power is suggested a mode of power that shares much with Foucault’s concept of biopower but which, with

¹ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, D. Heller-Roazen (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

² G. Agamben, “In Playland: Reflections on History and Play”, in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, L. Heron (trans.) (London: Verso, 2007), 73-96.

³ G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, K. Attell (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 37.

⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 4; M. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1998), 141-2.

the help of Agamben, is shown to be specific to childhood.⁵ The inquiry begins with the question of childhood as it was posed during the 19th century, examining how this positioned the figure of the child at the intersection of *zoē* and *bios*, animal and human, past and future. It ends with a discussion on how the current global obesity “epidemic” has transformed this one-time vision of mastery into a strategy of survival.

Between Innocence and Origins: Childhood as an “Anthropological Machine”

Children, like all animals, are born, but childhood is constructed, and in this simple statement can be seen the biological and social vectors of human life.⁶ In the West, when this biosocial relation is posed as a question, answers are generally framed by the concept of socialisation, and until recently it seemed that there was little else that needed to be said, that is, beyond considerations as to whether socialisation was adequate or inadequate, or whether it succeeded or failed in particular cases. Yet on closer inspection it turns out, as argued by Joanne Faulkner, that childhood is a “deceptively dense and complicated figure of thought”.⁷ This complex density arises through struggles which are staged in the name of truth, and these truths sediment in social consciousness in the form of shared meanings. One such meaning is, in Faulkner’s words, “the fantasy of childhood innocence”, which she examines as “a

⁵ When he first outlined the concept of biopolitics, Foucault described it as the “entry of life into history...of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques”, Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 141-3. In proposing the concept of biosocial power, I am arguing for a more finely calibrated understanding of the forms of knowledge, relations of power, types of calculation and technical innovations that take place within the realm of biopolitics.

⁶ On the historical/social construction of childhood see P. Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York: Vintage 1962); on conceptions of childhood see D. Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 19-36.

⁷ J. Faulkner, “Innocents and Oracles: The Child as a Figure of Knowledge and Critique in the Middle-Class Philosophical Imagination”. *Critical Horizons* 12(3) (2011): 323-346 (326).

space of experimentation for the imagining of human futures”.⁸ The association between childhood and innocence has become an established way of projecting visions of mastery, which is also a way of constituting and confronting the unruly remainders – in particular libidinal desires and appetites – that are to be mastered. Importantly, children themselves are positioned within this game of power/knowledge as vulnerable subjects: they are *not yet* sufficiently rational, capable, or moral, and so must be acted upon by those who would protect the innocence of children.⁹

In terms of how this division between innocence and its others is configured, Faulkner looks to Agamben’s writings to explore the ways in which childhood articulates the relation between ‘human’ and ‘animal’, arguing that “the child, conceived as an underdeveloped, nascent human, has come to represent the anthropomorphous animality adult humanity leaves in its wake, and which must be worked upon in order to create a better humanity”.¹⁰ Faulkner’s argument is important and convincing, particularly when she characterises childhood as an “intangible reserve”, meaning a “store of humanity that is assiduously watched over, drawn upon and controlled by adults”.¹¹ And yet the childhood that Faulkner is analysing is more than a posited innocence. It also takes the form of a foundation story – a theory of origins rather than innocence – that grounds itself in a discourse of liberty even as it constitutes freedom at the threshold of domination. It is this conception of childhood that I wish to focus on in this section of the article, using the writings of J. S. Mill – specifically his notion of ‘anteriority’ – to sketch an initial outline. The reason for beginning with Mill is not to commence a

⁸ J. Faulkner, “Negotiating Vulnerability through ‘Animal’ and ‘Child’”. *Angelaki* 16(4) (2011): 73-85 (78).

⁹ Faulkner, “Innocents and Oracles”, 326.

¹⁰ Faulkner, “Negotiating Vulnerability”, 74.

¹¹ Faulkner, “Negotiating Vulnerability”, 79.

history of ideas. Instead, the claim is that there are certain presuppositions packed tightly into his notion of anteriority which, as the nineteenth century wore on, would constitute childhood as a zone of particular intensity within the wider field of biopolitics. Consistent with Faulkner's analysis, this originates as a vision of mastery which is projected through childhood, but as will be seen below, this has since become a strategy of survival.

In his *On Liberty* (published in 1859), Mill posed the question of whether, and to what extent, "power can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual".¹² His question was specific to what he called "civilized communities", which is important for reasons to be discussed shortly, and in answering his question, Mill states emphatically that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others".¹³ In all other cases, the most that can be done is to "reason" with the person: to persuade, to "remonstrate", to "entreat"; resorting to force is ruled out, because "over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign".¹⁴ However, there are exceptions to this principle of non-interference:

...this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age of which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their actions as against external injury.¹⁵

¹² J. S. Mill, "On Liberty", in *John Stuart Mill: On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

¹³ Mill, "On Liberty", 14.

¹⁴ Mill, "On Liberty", 14.

¹⁵ Mill, "On Liberty", 14.

Here we see how the principle of non-interference is bounded by what it excludes, and it is important to note that Mill is not referring solely to biological immaturity in this passage, but also to “barbarians”, meaning “backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage”.¹⁶ Once the threshold of non-interference is crossed, then “despotism” is recommended as “a legitimate mode of government”, though on the condition that it be a benevolent despotism designed to “improve” those who are subject to it.¹⁷ My interest in these well-known passages from Mill is not the question of whether his views are justifiable, but the question of *how* Mill constructs this exception to the principle on non-interference, and the key concept is ‘anteriority’.

According to Mill, the principle of liberty “has no application to any state of things anterior to the time when mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion”.¹⁸ Here life is split and divided – children and barbarians can utter sounds and communicate, but the life they embody is not (yet) capable of comprehending the kind of ‘language’ that articulates reason and law, that distinguishes the just from the unjust, and which makes possible a properly political life.¹⁹ The concept of anteriority cleaves life into a relation of inclusion and exclusion, and yet that which is cast outside remains at the centre of civilized life as its constitutive condition of possibility. This is an example of what Agamben calls the “anthropological machine”, which “functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being

¹⁶ On this point see M. Valverde, “‘Despotism’ and Ethical Liberal Governance”. *Economy and Society* 25(3) (1996): 357-72.

¹⁷ Mill, “On Liberty”, 14-15.

¹⁸ Mill, “On Liberty”, 15.

¹⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12-13; Agamben, *The Open*, 24, 34-5.

from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human”.²⁰

Joined by the notion of anteriority, the figure of the child is more or less interchangeable with that of the barbarian: both or either represent life which is discerned as emerging from animal existence, but which is not yet part of civilized humanity. This depiction of life is neither *zoē* nor *bios* because it is necessarily a mixture of both: the child-like barbarian and the uncivilized child together denote a form of life which is more than naked life, and yet is not yet sufficiently ‘clothed’ or cultivated by language and reason, and thus is *prior to* the liberty bestowed upon those who have mastered their animal nature. Anteriority is a zone within a process whereby the biological and social vectors of life have entered into a struggle. Liberty demands that this struggle be taken in hand so that the outcome can be assured, and so Mill insists that the correct relation between adults and children is one of command and obedience.²¹ Although a temporary state of subjection, what this means in practice is that “the existing generation is master both of the training and the entire circumstances of the generation to come”.²² What is striking in these words is how they frame liberty as a task or technical undertaking, and the purpose of this machine is to govern life as it extends into the future.

Faulkner is correct when she argues that the figure of the innocent child is constructed in the form of an incompleteness (not yet), but to leave it at that is to overlook other ways in which childhood functions as a form of “anthropogenesis”.²³ The *not yet* of

²⁰ Agamben, *The Open*, 37.

²¹ Mill (2004b: 518-19)

²² Agamben, *The Open*, 91.

²³ Agamben, *The Open*, 68.

childhood anticipates a future which is imagined and projected, but as a state of anteriority, childhood (and its cultural analogue: “nonage”) signifies the historical birth of civilized humanity, and in this sense is *prior to*. Anteriority-despotism-liberty are laced together as a narrative that makes implicit sense given that the relationship between the *prior to* and the *not yet* reads like a book of life. Resembling both the genealogy of families and human history, this book of life is inscribed onto childhood in such a way that liberty is constituted at the threshold of domination.

This biosocial mode of power is despotic not simply because it is an analogue to the sovereign exception²⁴, which in this case entails suspending the sacrosanct principle of non-interference; it is despotic too because it is anchored in a stock of social knowledge which, though historically constituted, has sedimented in culture and consciousness so that it becomes *true* knowledge, and the idea of anteriority is a very particular type of truth.²⁵ To be sure, it exhibits traces of the past: for example, Rousseau’s conception of childhood as being equivalent to the state of nature, thus offering the pedagogue the means of creating the subject of the social contract.²⁶ But what Mill is referring to in the idea of anteriority takes its cue less from the past than from ideas emerging at that time, specifically in the field of natural science, and this resonates strongly with what Agamben refers to as “the decisive event of modernity”: the “politicisation of bare life as such”.²⁷ In Mill’s writings we see the relation between *zoē* and *bios* conceptualised as a *passage*, and yet the twin vectors of his despotism – the two modes of anteriority relating to cultural progression and biological maturation – remain more or less distinct.

²⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*

²⁵ On the politics of truth see M. Foucault, “Truth and power”, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3: Power* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 111-133 (131).

²⁶ Author.

²⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 4.

This would soon change. A new science of childhood, which grounded itself in the theory of evolution, began to take shape in the closing decades of that century, and this would align the vectors of life so that they merged into a unified and governable arc which was to be brought under conscious control.

The Raw Material of Morality

Among those who pioneered the science of childhood were James Sully, Grote Professor of Philosophy of Mind and Logic at University College, London, who established one of the first British psychological laboratories in 1897, and G. Stanley Hall, first president of the American Psychological Association, and also the original president of Clark University, Massachusetts.²⁸ Sully was strongly influenced by Hall, but not to the point of strict emulation, for he focused on the infant child, while Hall claimed that adolescence was the most important stage of life, because “In no psychic soil...does seed, bad as well as good, strike such deep root, grow so rankly, or bear fruit so quickly or so surely”.²⁹ In Hall’s eyes, the child was a “human sapling”, and with more than a sprinkling of hyperbole, he argued that “the whole future of life” was dependant on how the “feral instincts” of the young were “fed and formed”.³⁰ In the case of Sully, we might begin with the way he dismissed theologians “who maintain the doctrine of natural depravity” in children, and also poets who wrote only of the “charm of infancy”.³¹ Whether the assumption was that of innate evil or innocence, all such attempts to “fix the moral worth of the child” made the error of judging things by the

²⁸ On the background to Sully see H. Cunningham, *The Children of the Poor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 198; on Hall see D. Ross, *G. Stanley Hall: The Psychologist as Prophet* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

²⁹ G. S. Hall, *Adolescence its Psychology and its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (New York and London: D Appleton and Company, 1911), xviii-ix.

³⁰ Hall, *Adolescence*, xi-xiv.

³¹ J. Sully, *Studies of Childhood* (New York: Longmans Green and Co., 1903), 228-9.

wrong standards. The correct approach, he insisted, was to examine the child “in his naked primitiveness, looking out for those instinctive tendencies which according to modern science are only a little less clearly marked out in the young of our own species than in a puppy or a chick”.³²

In these ideas can be seen an outline of how questions concerning the difference and the relation between animal/human, nature/culture, savage/civilized were converging on the figure of the child, and there was an urgency to this which was born of a context where the specter of ‘degeneration’ loomed large. This had gone through several incarnations since the middle of the nineteenth century, and when Hall and Sully were making their mark it articulated a variety of debates on the relative strength and weakness of nation-states.³³ Nested within the degeneration issue were theories of heritability concerning moral disposition, such as the idea that “degenerate” families passed on “defective germ-plasm” which became manifest in a whole variety of social pathologies.³⁴ By the start of the twentieth century the theory of evolution had spawned a universe of ideas and activities which coalesced around the insight that evolution was by no means a unidirectional process, and that reversal and regression remained a possibility due to instincts, urges and appetites which were a residue of the past but also recapitulated in the present. And this idea of recapitulation, originating in Ernst Haeckel’s biogenetic law (i.e. that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny), provided the theoretical armature around which the new science of childhood was assembled.³⁵

³² Sully, *Studies of Childhood*, 229.

³³ See D. Pick, *Faces of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³⁴ N. H. Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies 1877-1919* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).

³⁵ See Cunningham, *Children of the Poor*, 129.

Agamben notes that Haeckel's work on evolution received a boost in 1891 when Eugen Debois, a Dutch military doctor, discovered skeletal fragments on the island of Java. Haeckel announced that these ancient remains – a femur and part of a skull – were proof of “the much-sought ‘missing link’, supposed to be wanting in the evolutionary chain of the primates”.³⁶ For Agamben, the significance of this episode lies in the way Haeckel's “missing link” functions as a sort of black box: absent the Javanese remains, the idea itself is sufficient to explain that which is presupposed, which in this instance concerns the passage from animal to man. For Hall and Sully, childhood functioned in much the same way.

According to Sully, the “mental life” of the child was a “brief *résumé* of the more important features in the slow upward progress of the species”. Childhood thus provided a window through which the trained eye could study the “mental history of the race”.³⁷ This knowledge was of more than academic interest, for just as savagery was being tamed by civilisation, so the “wild untamed nature” of the child could be “subdued” by education, which would “fashion” it into “something higher and better”.³⁸ The “momentous problem of rearing children” was to be solved by ascertaining the “raw material of morality”, which would be sifted from the evidence accumulated by studying manifestations of rage, the impulse of obedience, the propensity to lie, or in more general terms, the relationship between a “primitive egoism” and the “the moral qualities distinctive of civilized man”.³⁹ For his part, Hall stressed the need to “further coordinate childhood and youth with the development of the race”, and he was

³⁶ Haeckel cited in Agamben, *The Open*: 34.

³⁷ Sully, *Studies of Childhood*, 7.

³⁸ Sully, *Studies of Childhood*, 8, 235.

³⁹ Sully, *Studies of Childhood*, 10, 228-66.

convinced that the scientific study of children would yield “true norms” that would serve as “criteria by which to both diagnose and measure arrest and retardation in the individual and the race”.⁴⁰ These words, which echoed back and forth across the Atlantic in the form of university lectures, scholarly publications, research reports and conference papers, and which were made practical in schools, clinics and playgrounds, transformed the normative force of Mill’s despot into a normatively-neutral body of knowledge which gradually acquired the authority to legislate on cases of abnormal behaviour and development.⁴¹

Hall’s “true norms” were nothing more than aggregates derived from the accumulation of data on individual children, and it is worth noting that Adolphe Quetelet, one of the pioneers of statistical inquiry, described the figure of “average man” as a “fiction”.⁴² But this was proving to be an extremely powerful fiction, and those who built on the foundations laid by Hall and Sully – people like Arnold Gesell, who conducted his research at the Yale Psycho-Clinic from 1911 – would develop techniques that transformed such aggregations into objective standards against which children were measured and assessed. In cases where a particular child was deemed to be troublesome or disturbed, what took place was not simply an exercise in classification, but also a judgement that formed the basis of normalising interventions.⁴³ This then is how biosocial power was configured as a normative science of childhood, or as Foucault put it: “psychiatry was able to constitute itself as a general authority for the analysis of

⁴⁰ Hall, *Adolescence*, viii.

⁴¹ See N. Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

⁴² A. Quetelet, *A Treatise on Man and the Development of his Faculties* (New York: Burt Franklin. 1842).

⁴³ Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 130-1, 141-50.

conduct through a kind of angled trajectory that increasingly focused on the little confused corner of life that is childhood”.⁴⁴

In his *Governing the Soul*, Nikolas Rose makes the point that what distinguishes this mode of expertise – i.e. what marks it out from earlier philosophical inquiries into childhood as a way of thinking the inborn versus acquired attributes of humanity (such as in the writings of Locke and Rousseau) – is that it brought “a new scientific gaze” to bear upon childhood.⁴⁵ This idea of a gaze – which appears frequently in Foucault’s work as a way of denoting the interlacing of power/knowledge – seems particularly apt in the way that Sully and Hall ground the certainty of knowledge in their ability to see *through* and *beyond* the figure of the child. Sully explains that “the evolutionist *sees*” evidence of how “the infants of civilized races”, as with “the lowest races of mankind”, stand “in close proximity to the animal world”.⁴⁶ Hall noted that “our slums are putrifying sores whose denizens anthropologists believe lower in the moral and intellectual scale than any known race of savages”, but he insisted that “an evolutionist must hold that the best and not the worst will survive and prevail...I *see* clearly the beginnings of better things”.⁴⁷ The specular gaze of the child psychologist constructs a book of life which is at once a story of origins, a diagnosis of present problems, and a vision of the future. Of course Sully and Hall did not exercise a monopoly over how problems were identified or explained, and it would be foolish to suggest any type of consensus, but disagreement can also provide traction in transforming conjecture into truth. It was assumed/asserted that because they had not yet acquired habits of discipline

⁴⁴ M. Foucault, *Abnormal Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975* (New York: Picador, 2003), 307.

⁴⁵ Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 141.

⁴⁶ Sully, *Studies of Childhood*, 5 emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Hall, *Adolescence*, xviii, emphasis added.

and control, that children felt the presence of the animal and the savage most acutely, and this provided an opportunity for creative experimentation – to work out how the biological, psychological and cultural vectors of life could be aligned, coordinated, and mastered.

Agamben suggests that biopolitical modernity was forged through a symbiosis of medicine and politics, which constitutes an “ambiguous terrain in which the physician and the sovereign seem to exchange roles”.⁴⁸ Without suggesting Agamben is wrong, it could be added that one of the sites that makes this ambiguous terrain possible is the school and the many pedagogical techniques and technologies that move in and out of the school in forging the alliance not only between politics and medicine, but also social work, philanthropy, and the many other modes of intervention that have combined in making childhood “the most intensely governed sector of personal existence”.⁴⁹ If we were to pose the question of *how* developmental psychology succeeded in establishing itself as a distinct branch of the human sciences, then one important answer would be mass compulsory education, which made large numbers of children available for inspection, and which also sorted children into age-specific cohorts whereby tests could be standardised and statistically reliable test results could be accumulated and systemised.⁵⁰ It is also worth noting that, when it was created in 1907, the 1,000 strong membership of the British Child Study Society was comprised not only of psychologists, but also teachers.⁵¹ When Sully identified education as the means of

⁴⁸ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 143, 159.

⁴⁹ Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 121.

⁵⁰ H. Hendrick, “Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: An Interpretative Survey, 1800 to the Present”, in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, A. James and A. Prout (eds) (London: The Falmer Press, 1997), 34-62 (47-9); Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 142.

⁵¹ Cunningham, *Children of the Poor*, 198.

subduing the wild untamed nature of the child, he was not speaking figuratively. This then is the scientific-pedagogic analogue to Mill's despot: it connects the *prior to* and the *not yet* of childhood; it ties them together as a narrative that spans the relation between *zoē* and *bios* so that the twin vectors of Mill's despotism converge and merge: childhood was now the intersection of ontogeny and phylogeny, and Mill's despot was overwritten by an impartial scientific truth which would henceforth fuel the anthropological machine.

Intermediate Reflection: Biosocial Power and the Anthropological Machine

Biosocial power was assembled around the objective of taking hold of life by harnessing the process of evolution so that it could be directed and controlled. There was certainly a human cost (eugenics might suffice as shorthand for the many examples that might be mentioned), but the focus here concerns the futures projected through childhood at that time. What was imagined was an achieved state of mastery: a future that entirely subdues the residues of humanity's animal past. And yet this quest constructed its own paradox, because children would remain – in Sully's words – “representative of wild untamed nature”. There can be no human future without children, and this means that humanity can never escape its own animality, and so the anthropological machine gathers momentum by storing that which it appears to dispose of.

But things have since changed, and this particular process might be seen to track Agamben's argument that “the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm,

and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction”.⁵² An example: Article 12.2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “the child shall...be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child”.⁵³ Article 12 is closely related to Article 13, concerning freedom of expression, which is widely considered to be a cornerstone of democracy and citizenship.⁵⁴ It should be noted that Article 12 includes important caveats, relating in particular to age and maturity, which might serve to deny speaker’s rights to children, or it may be that the views of certain children (the very young, the intellectually disabled) must be routed through a mediator or representative before they are listened to. Nevertheless, this is one important and influential indication of how the “innocence” of children is being “rethought”.⁵⁵ Now endowed with “their own cluster of political rights”, Herdís Thorgeirsdóttir makes the point that children have “been given the power of speech so that they are no longer a mere voice indicating pleasure and pain but equipped with the means to have a more perfected impact on their lives and destinies than if simply regarded as a lower sort”.⁵⁶

Childhood is transitioning “from voice to language”⁵⁷, and even as this is taking place, the anthropological machine is stalling in other ways too, jammed by a sort of historical reversal. We have apparently crossed a threshold whereby the futures envisioned by Mill, Hall and Sully have already receded into the past. It seems we have created

⁵² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 9.

⁵³ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20th November, 1989).

⁵⁴ See for example S. Detrick, *A Commentary on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1999), 232.

⁵⁵ H. Thorgeirsdóttir, *A Commentary on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Article 13: The Right to Freedom of Expression* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2006), 51-3.

⁵⁶ Thorgeirsdóttir, *Commentary*, 3.

⁵⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*: 7.

conditions whereby the “civilized” world Mill once equated with liberty is now under siege, threatened by its own metabolic life, which, far from retreating in the wake of an anthropological machine fuelled by biosocial power, approaches from the future. This is the problem framed by obesity discourse.

The Obesity Epidemic: Bare Life and Human Futures

In 2000, the World Health Organization described obesity as a “global epidemic”, while more recently its regional office for Europe has published a body of evidence indicating that “the epidemic is progressing at especially alarming rates among children”.⁵⁸ While prevalence is shown to vary along the lines of gender, class and ethnicity, this is a discourse that unites even as it divides. Obesity knows no exception, and so on one level the discourse operates at the level of life in an undifferentiated sense. At the same time populations are splintered into categories of health and morbidity which in turn mark out zones of interdiction and exclusion as certain behaviours and classes of person come to represent the threat. Viewed in this way, there are certain similarities that might be made between obesity and the spectre of degeneration at the turn of the twentieth century: both are narratives of decline which are anchored in questions concerning the governability of life, and both operate at the level of populations even as they single out particular cases for special treatment. But there is also an important difference, because it seems that the anthropological machine no longer functions by “excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself”.⁵⁹ On the contrary, the machine now squares up to bare life as its limit condition. Before examining this point in more detail,

⁵⁸ World Health Organization, *Obesity: Preventing and Managing the Global Epidemic* (Geneva, World Health Organization, 2000); F. Branca, H. Nikogosian and T. Lobstein (eds), *The Challenge of Obesity in the WHO European Region and the Strategies for Response* (World Health Organisation Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen, 2007), 9.

⁵⁹ Agamben, *The Open*: 37.

I first want to sketch the main coordinates of this discourse in order to demonstrate that it signifies an impending confrontation with bare life.

The main reason for framing obesity as an epidemic is epidemiological. It is said to be a feature of modern consumer society whereby the availability of “energy dense” food combines with a reduction in energy expenditure, resulting in a population-level increase in body size. In other words, the problem is not concentrated or confined to pockets of the population, but spreads like an infectious disease – hence resembling an epidemic. Yet obesity is not a diagnosable illness in its own right, and while associated with a variety of non-communicable diseases, many thin people also suffer from these same diseases.⁶⁰ It is considerations such as these that have seen the “truth” of obesity discourse contested, but it is also true that denying the existence of an obesity problem is akin to denying global warming.⁶¹ And indeed, as will be seen below, there is another parallel between obesity and global warming in that both might be said to re-invoke G. Stanley Hall’s hyperbolic statement that the “whole future of life” now hangs in the balance.

The most common way of measuring obesity is the Body Mass Index (BMI), which is calculated by dividing body weight by height squared (kg/m^2). Originally an instrument of anthropometry, the BMI was invented by Adolphe Quetelet who, as noted above, also invented the concept of “average man”, and it entered the field of medicine only during

⁶⁰ B. Ross, “Fat or Fiction: Weighing the ‘Obesity Epidemic’”, in *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality and Ideology*, M. Gard and J. Wright (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 86-106 (95).

⁶¹ For a thoroughgoing critique of obesity discourse, see M. Gard and J. Wright, *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality and Ideology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

the 1960s.⁶² The main criticism of the BMI is that it fails to distinguish between adipose tissue and lean muscle. Many elite athletes, certainly those that require a lot of muscular strength such as weight-lifters and track cyclists would be classed as overweight using the BMI, and in such cases body mass is hardly an indication of poor health. Thus critics point out that the BMI grossly oversimplifies what is in fact a complex relationship (body size and health), but as pointed out by Ian Hacking, while there are other more reliable ways of measuring fat, the BMI is extremely cheap and simple to use.⁶³ Walk into most GP surgeries today and you will see an easy-to-read BMI chart on the wall, or even handier are the numerous BMI calculators available on the internet. It takes but seconds to find out where one stands on the BMI scale, and this makes it very effective as an instrument in communicating the threat of obesity.

The word obese comes from the Latin *obedere*, which is ‘to eat up, to devour’, and today it continues to connote meanings associated with greed and laziness, with one notable example being an influential science paper that set out to ascertain whether obesity in Britain was a consequence of “gluttony or sloth”¹.⁶⁴ Yet the curious thing about this type of implicit moral judgement is that the ‘sin’ of obesity is not necessarily the fault of the gluttonous and the slothful. Andrew Prentice, one of the authors of the paper just mentioned, gave evidence before a House of Commons Health Committee in the UK, where he explained that:

⁶² I. Hacking, “Genetics, Biosocial Groups and the Future of Identity”, *Daedalus* Fall, (2006): 81-95 (88).

⁶³ Hacking, “Genetics, Biosocial Groups and the Future of Identity”, 88.

⁶⁴ On this point see Ross, “Fat or Fiction”, 92. The article cited here is A. M. Prentice and S. A. Jebb, “Obesity in Britain: Gluttony or Sloth?” *British Medical Journal* 311(1995): 437-439. I describe it as influential because it was incorporated into the 2004 report of the House of Commons Select Health Committee on Obesity, which has been instrumental in shaping anti-obesity policy in the UK. For a critical appraisal see B. Evans, “‘Gluttony or Sloth’: Critical Geographies of Bodies and Morality in (Anti) Obesity Policy”. *Area* 38(3) (2006): 259-267.

You have experimental volunteers who you ask to eat normally but you secretly change the content of their foods—then, as soon as you add fat in and increase the energy density they overeat... The reason they do this is they continue to eat... the same amount of food, without recognizing – their bodies simply do not recognize – that it has more calories, more energy in it.⁶⁵

When it comes to the question of who or what is to blame for the rapid onset of obesity, the process of inquiry places the obese body in the frame, but it does not necessarily place the obese individual in the dock. Instead it enters the frame by splitting into two explanatory tracks: one being the ‘energy balance equation’, and the other a theory of biological ‘vulnerability’.

Comparable to the BMI in terms of its simplicity, the energy balance equation states that if energy inputs are equal to energy outputs, then body mass remains constant. It can be used to explain individual cases of obesity, and it can also be used to model the ‘obesogenic environment’, which takes socio-cultural factors into consideration, such as the availability and affordability of nutritious versus energy dense food, or access to parks and playgrounds as avenues for physical activity. This is where scientific explanation meets policy interventions, which target not only “the level of physical activity” and “the force of dietary habits”, but also “primary appetite control in the brain”, which is where the notion of biological vulnerability comes into play.⁶⁶

In an article titled “The Dawn of Darwinian Medicine”, George C. Williams and Randolph M. Nesse explain that “human biology is designed for stone-age

⁶⁵ House of Commons Health Committee: *Obesity* (London: The Stationary Office, 2004) (HC 23-1), 26.

⁶⁶ Foresight, *Tackling Obesities: Future Choices*, 2nd ed. (H. M. Government Office for Science, 2007), 8.

conditions”.⁶⁷ Poorly equipped to deal with an abundance of fat, salt and sugar, the human body is apparently “programmed” to store fat reserves in time of plenty so as to cope with periods of scarcity, while an inbuilt tendency to minimise physical activity is also adaptive in terms of conserving energy. Individuals with a “thrifty genotype” are said to be particularly vulnerable to obesity, because such people are good at storing calories but no longer “benefit from the episodes of famine to which they are especially adapted”.⁶⁸ In these cases, dieting is ineffective, because restricting food intake is interpreted as shortage by the “regulatory mechanism”, which then triggers an “adaptive response” leading to weight gain. Thrifty genes might be an asset in situations of extreme scarcity, but they become a liability in times of abundance.

While these ways of measuring and explaining the sudden onset of obesity can and have been critiqued, my aim in presenting them is not to evaluate their scientific validity but to suggest that this is a discourse which is assembled around the problem of bare life: an epidemic of excess flesh; an appetite for food that exceeds the body’s nutritional requirements; the human organism and its habitat as a stock of energy; humanity understood as a bundle of adaptive functions and regulatory mechanisms – this is naked life which, in a curious reversal of history, is now overtaking civilization. The negative implications of obesity are generally framed in terms of costs, the most immediate of which are soaring public health bills and economic inactivity among people with

⁶⁷ G. C. Williams and R. M. Nesse, “The Dawn of Darwinian Medicine”. *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 66(1) (1991): 1-22 (1). Beyond featuring in the critical obesity literature, the significance of this article can be discerned from a citation report generated by Thompson Reuters Web of Science, which lists 242 citations, peaking in 2009 and 2011.

⁶⁸ Williams and Nesse, “The Dawn of Darwinian Medicine”, 14; see also House of Commons Health Committee, *Obesity*, 26.

obesity-related illness and disabilities.⁶⁹ But there are other implications too, and there is arguably no clearer statement on this than the words of Richard Carmona, who lectured on the topic of obesity at the University of South Carolina while serving as US Surgeon General in 2006:

Where will our soldiers, sailors and airmen come from? Where will our police and firemen come from if the youngsters today are on a trajectory that says that they will be obese? ... Often when I speak, the press want to talk about the tragedy of the day; they want to talk about terrorism, they want to talk about weapons of mass destruction, they want to talk about emerging infections. I did a press conference a couple of years ago... one reporter... said to me, Surgeon General, what's the most pressing issue before you today? I said *obesity*. The room was silent, nobody knew what to ask, and I said: obesity is the *terror within*. It is destroying us, destroying our society, from within, and unless we do something about it, the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9/11 or any other terrorist event that you can point out.⁷⁰

The immanence of this “terror within” might be seen to operate in two registers. First is a biological immanence, because according to the science, and as noted already, one of the key causes of the obesity epidemic is “biological vulnerability”.⁷¹ Second is a social

⁶⁹ In the UK, the agency Foresight, which reports directly to the Government Chief Scientific Adviser and the Cabinet Office, predicts that the cost to the NHS will double to £10 billion per annum by 2050, while the wider economic costs may reach £50 billion (*Tackling Obesities*, 5). In the US, the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity states the cost of treating obesity in adults rose from “approximately \$40 billion in 1998” to an “estimated \$147 billion” in 2008. White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity, *Report to the President* (Domestic Policy Council, Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2010), 3.

⁷⁰ R. H. Carmona, “Johnson and Johnson Healthcare Lecture” (University of South Carolina School of Law, 2006).

⁷¹ Foresight, *Tackling Obesities*, 8.

immanence, because the problem is perpetuated within the generational order.⁷² In other words, when it comes to the question of action – the urgent need to do something – biosocial power is invoked. Awareness is insufficient, because our genetic inheritance may be stronger than reason or will, not just at the level of individuals, but at the level of population. At the same time, as noted by the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity which published its report in 2010, “genes associated with obesity were present in the population prior to the current epidemic; genes only account for susceptibility to obesity and generally contribute to obesity only when other influences are at work”.⁷³ This is where the struggle will be won or lost, because the purpose of the Task Force is to “solve the problem of *childhood* obesity within a generation” (emphasis added), and to this end First Lady Michelle Obama has taken the helm of a campaign called *Let’s Move*. Speaking at the launch, Michelle Obama echoed Carmona’s assessment of the problem when she explained that “the physical and emotional health of an entire generation and the economic health and security of our nation is at stake”.⁷⁴

Childhood is the epicentre of the obesity crisis, and it is so for reasons that spiral back through the child study movement to J. S. Mill’s discourse of liberty, i.e. the figure of the child remains at the threshold of the *prior to* and the *not yet*. But childhood no longer signifies an absence (i.e. childhood = humanity minus language or reason) so much as an excess, and humanity’s excess looms in the future as history’s unanticipated and unwanted destination.

⁷² On the concept of generational order, see L. Alanen, “Generational Order”, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, J. Qvortrup, W. A. Corsaro and M. S. Honig (eds) (Basingstoke Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 159-74.

⁷³ White House Task Force, *Report to the President*, 7.

⁷⁴ Office of the First Lady, “First Lady Michelle Obama Launches Let’s Move: America’s Move to Raise a Healthier Generation of Kids” (White House Executive Office, 2010).

One of the recurring features of childhood as a way of deploying biosocial power – and this is where my analysis connects up with Faulkner’s work on innocence and vulnerability – is that it is by default a moral imperative to protect children against harm. In other words, once childhood is invoked, there is little need to answer the *why* question; it is sufficient that we act to protect children. Within the compass of the obesity problem, the morality of intervention is framed by the claim (which is at once a hypothetical scenario, a normatively-loaded assertion, and a statistical probability) that the current generation of children may not live as long as their parents.⁷⁵ This is effective as an argument, because it resonates with the great public health crusades against infectious diseases such as cholera and tuberculosis, and it suggests that the progress made by the science-state alliance may be going into reverse – unless we act now and act decisively. If life as quantity – the number of years we can expect to live – has ceased to expand along the generational axis, then we have a profound moral crisis on our hands. The question then is this: are we willing to sacrifice our children by failing to act? And here we enter into the realm of taboo. But there is also another conception of vulnerability, i.e. the biological vulnerability noted above which, in the way this connects up with politics and public health (as in the statements by Carmona and Michelle Obama), becomes a matter of security – economic security (productivity), social security (the cost of welfare), and national security (military capacity and the staffing of front-line public services). These concerns, i.e. the moral and the strategic, might be analytically distinguishable, but they converge as an indisputable logic: children are the future.

⁷⁵ White House Task Force, *Report to the President*, 3; House of Commons Health Committee, *Obesity*, 46.

Earlier I suggested that a science of childhood was in part made possible by the birth of the modern school. Today, the school provides an ideal staging ground for the war on obesity. In the UK, the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) was rolled out in 2007, following recommendations by the House of Commons Health Select Committee on Obesity. Essentially a BMI screening programme which is administered by what Bethan Evans calls “child health technicians”⁷⁶, the NCMP weighs and measures children at reception (ages 4 – 5) and again in year 6 (ages 10 – 11). The information gathered from this mode of surveillance serves three related purposes: it provides the National Obesity Observatory⁷⁷ with data which is used to map and visualise obesity (in much the same way as the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention do); it enables authorities in the fields of health, education and social services to set goals and monitor performance; and it increases public understanding of child weight issues by “engaging families with the issue of healthy weight in children”.⁷⁸ This last point needs to be clarified, because in practice, “engaging families” means sending test results to parents so that the BMI enters into the space of the home, both as a statement on parental responsibility and as a judgment on the adequacy of parenting⁷⁹. In children the war between metabolic life and civilization is seen to be more latent than manifest, and even in cases where an unborn or infant child may be genetically disposed to obesity, onset can be counteracted through measures

⁷⁶ B. Evans, “‘Be Fit not Fat’: Broadening the Childhood Obesity Debate Beyond Dualisms”. *Children’s Geographies* 2(2) (2004): 288-290.

⁷⁷ The National Obesity Observatory recently became part of Public Health England, an executive agency of the Department of Health, see <http://www.noo.org.uk/>.

⁷⁸ See Department of Health Obesity Team, *National Child Measurement Programme: Operational Guidance for the 2011/12 School Year* (Department of Health, 2011).

⁷⁹ The NCMP began as a ‘monitoring’ programme, whereby children and parents would *not* be made aware of the test results, before being transformed into its current guise as a ‘screening’ programme. See B. Evans and R. Colls, “Measuring Fatness, Governing Bodies: the Spatialities of the Body Mass Index (BMI) in Anti-Obesity Politics. *Antipode* 41(5) (2009): 1051-83.

such as maternal nutrition and subsequent environmental controls, whether ensuring regular exercise and/or training children in diet and nutrition.⁸⁰ Children are recruited alongside parents, teachers, and health professionals by a biopolitical strategy that reaches into the home, the school, and the clinic in assembling a machine that attempts to secure the future by measuring, monitoring and regulating its own metabolic life. But what kind of future is now projected through childhood?

Conclusion

The obesity epidemic is a battle between the biological and social vectors of life, and the motivating force in the fight against obesity is a series of negatives: that obesity erodes a person's health, sense of self-worth and self-esteem; that it places an unnecessary and preventable strain on the cost of public health; that it reduces the pool of people who can be called upon to defend the nation and play their part in public service; that it reduces productivity and undermines economic security; and that ultimately it threatens not only the future of nations and states, but Western civilization. Obesity discourse articulates a universe of negativity, and the question of *why* obesity should be combated is punctuated by a question mark that signifies a profound indeterminacy concerning human futures. Childhood has come to articulate this indeterminacy, so that the spectre of an upward trend in childhood obesity has become a container for, and generator of, morality-based fears. This in itself is nothing new, but in contrast to the book of life constructed by the science of childhood a century ago, biosocial power no longer promises freedom from the despotism that resides at its very core. Instead, repressive measures are necessitated by the imperative of securing the

⁸⁰ On these issues see Foresight, *Tackling Obesity*, 88; White House Task Force, *Report to the President*, 7.

future against humanity's own excesses, so that the freedom once projected through childhood now looks very much like a survival strategy. It seems we have surrendered the hope of mastering bare life, which is no longer a governable beginning so much as a likely terminus. And what of the anthropological machine itself? If this was once assembled by opposing human life to animal life, gaining momentum by attempting to isolate and master the residues of "wild untamed nature", then it is now characterised by an impending collision with its own metabolic life as its limit condition.

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