

# **Hans-Martin Sass (2020) Health and Happiness of Political Bodies. Biocultures, Businesses, Biopolitics**

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In this book, Hans-Martin Sass sketches out a sort of biocentric humanism different from Rosi Braidotti's biocentric post-humanism. Common to both, though, is their locating life at the center of ethics and politics. At the same time, they are aware of the crucial role present-day technoscience plays in managing and also interfering in and changing life itself (as in gene editing, which entails the introduction of irreversible and inheritable changes in DNA), while remaining cognizant of the nature of the new risks. However, they differ in what could be called "affirmative biopolitics", as termed by Roberto Esposito. Braidotti finds that the humanist tradition bears a crushing weight and that the very concept of "human" responds to a negative biopolitics, one that has been conceived from the very outset as a narrow description of what "human" should be (excluding women, racialized people and the poor).

Sass, to the contrary, does not disown the humanist tradition, although he decenters and then recenters the human by focusing on its condition of being alive. He focuses on the protection of “life”, and not exactly on the protection of what the humanist tradition has considered “the human”, excluding part of the human beings, and then, he focuses again on the protection of human beings in the broader context of the protection of life. For him, the main features of life are complexity and diversity. The humanist tradition, which he traces back to Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman, and Vedic, Buddhist and Confucian philosophies, has kept sight of that fact. At individual and collective levels, what characterizes *bios* for him are, “species-specific and individual-specific degrees of the 8 C’s capacities: communication and cooperation, competency and competition, contemplation and calculation, compassion and cultivation” (p. 4). He draws a parallel in individual and collective organisms and proposes understanding political bodies as living beings. Nonetheless, his perspective is not entirely sociobiological, since he does not affirm that biology necessarily determines sociology or politics. In this, he attributes to life those features that had been classically considered “cultural”, such that his conception of life is not biological. As such, when he describes a kind of utopian affirmative biopolitics (in the last chapter entitled “A Concluding Narrative: The Little Town by the River”) and states that we should not avoid conflict and diversity in political bodies, he seeks to draw this as a conclusion on his conception of life in both its individual and collective dimensions.

However, his argument about how biopolitical bodies should preserve their complexity and diversity and how they can avoid becoming dysfunctional bodies hinges on the idea that a certain equilibrium can maintain life (p. 46)

because this equilibrium is a part of life. And it hinges on the idea that life needs to be controlled following a certain program. “Dysfunctional life” seems more a normative than biological concept, although the problem at this point is not the possible naturalistic fallacy, but the very postulate of a “dysfunctional life”, which, coupled with Sass’s biopolitical utopia, can reintroduce negative biopolitical logics, e.g. logics of inclusion and exclusion when defining life and political *bios*.

Sass identifies the following present-day global risks to “political bodies and corporate bodies” (p. 31): weaponized pandemics, the consequences of a total loss of electricity, the collapse of the paper-and-promise economic model, revolts and repressions arising as a result of digital media, the confusion between geographical and cyberspace realities, and the challenges of artificial intelligence and a cyberspace integrated in the geographical bios. He sees these risks as the vulnerabilities of human communities as they are currently organized and insists that they threaten “control” or represent a “loss of control”. They can be seen as the consequences of the increased interconnection and complexity of the globalized world. The answer, though, does not lie in reducing complexity by, for example, looking for “less confusing healthier interactive biotopes which offer solidarity and camaraderie, friendship and a new personal identity in such groups and movements in new and simple territories of local geography and supportive and attractive cyberspace” (p. 56). If centralized control is the answer (as Sass suggests), though, one can only wonder about the kind of control that would be necessary to regulate this situation. Yet, to my view, it is not true that the global trends giving rise to those risks are not regulated or controlled; the problem is that they tend to

be regulated following the interests of dominant, but minor groups as e. g. some states, multinational companies or very wealthy individuals.

Sass' references to the need to control the "dysfunctions" of life are not his last word. Or, at least, they are not what he apparently defends. When he posits his bioethical imperative, his notion of life clearly seems to attempt to resist the techno-scientific turn, despite his simultaneous attempt to integrate it. He defends the need to cultivate the characteristics of life, the "one geospace" that may be destroyed technologically or by cyberspace migration and relocation (p. 62). At present, I think that it is not enough to say that we should "respect every living being as an end in itself and treat it, if possible, as such" (p. 63), because living beings are no longer given entities with certain characteristics we simply respect or fail to respect and based on which we can build functional or dysfunctional communities. Today, not only living beings, but life itself is being artificially poietized. The perplexity we face is that, inasmuch as life is no longer something given to us but something in which we are irreversibly intervening, we are changing life's characteristics. Clearly, life cannot be removed from politics, for politics relates to how to we organize living together and life is being manipulated with political (and economic) goals, which gives rise to what we call "biopolitics". The question is whether we can organize living together without manipulating life, with no other goal except living together in a moment in which life is already being artificially poietized.

To conclude, although Sass does not entirely draw out the consequences of his awareness of the artificial manipulation of life, his book contributes to stimulating, interesting, and highly relevant contemporary biopolitical and bioethical debates.

**Conflict of Interest:** N. Bueno Gómez declares that she has no competing interests.