

Critiquing Immunity, Critiquing Security

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Critiquing Immunity, Critiquing Security

Paul Gorby

Mark Neocleous' *The Politics of Immunity: Security and the Policing of Bodies* is a book about the body and the body politic, about how the discourses, the metaphors, and the fictions of one tend to influence the other, and how our political obsession with immunity gives rise to autoimmune disorders at the societal level. If, as immunologist Frank Macfarlane Burnet claimed, immunology is more a question of philosophy than biology, then Neocleous demonstrates that it is very much a question of *political* philosophy.

To call this work interdisciplinary is a noticeable understatement, since it covers, alongside political and philosophical debates, literature in biology, immunology, psychoanalysis, thermodynamics, and international law. The broad spectrum of research that Neocleous draws upon for his arguments should put to bed any concerns that this book is a 'cash-in' on the COVID-19 pandemic. Far from being simply another attempt to rapidly produce something which can appeal to a broad audience interested in the politics of the pandemic, this book is clearly the outcome of a long-term research agenda.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is mentioned only occasionally in *The Politics of Immunity*, its critique of the dual notions of immunity and security, which Neocleous identifies as being at the heart of modern politics, is deeply relevant for how we ought to think about pandemic and post-pandemic politics. As this book demonstrates time and again, the scientific search for immunity has significant political consequences, and the politics of security influences the science of immunity. "Descriptions of viruses now read like they have been penned by security intellectuals while descriptions of terrorism read like they have been penned by virologists." (17). It is no coincidence, Neocleous writes, that the UK organisation for collecting and analysing COVID infection data – the Joint Biosecurity Centre – is modelled on the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre, sharing senior staff and adapting the same "levels of threat" model used to assess terrorism. Given the contemporary relevance of the politics of immunity and security, this book will appeal to a broad audience as well as academics working on the issues and themes Neocleous delves into.

The first chapter confronts various scientific theories of the cell, which turn out to have deeply political implications. The chapter begins with a discussion of the militarised language of much biological and immunological research, which treats the body and its immunity as a site of never-ending war. While there has been significant pushback against this discourse of cellular immunity as warfare, Neocleous points out that "even those seeking to imagine immunity without recourse to the trope of militarized violence fall back on other tropes of violent powers of elimination" (52). Many biological thinkers critical of the discourse of war turn instead to a discourse of policing, reflective of a "liberal position which is happy to critique war and its tropes but less comfortable with a *critique of security*" (42). The imagery of police-cells engaging in "immunological surveillance" (46) in the search for "illegal aliens" (48) within the body remains prominent within scientific discourse and popular understandings of the body.

This conception of cellular war and cellular policing is important because it naturalises the prevailing ideas of war power and police power, making them seem

inherent to human beings as biological entities. For much early work on immunology, the cell was the elementary part of the body, which meant it was used to explain human biology and in turn the human as such. The common understanding of the cell as an individual and independent entity within the “society” of the body both reflected and helped to cement “bourgeois ideals of self-contained and self-regulating units” (66) within political society. The cell was also a security concept, as we can see from its non-biological meaning: an enclosed room within a prison. “The cell was being consolidated as a political site of enclosure and confinement, training and discipline, at the very moment of its discovery and rise in the realm of physiology” (74).

The second chapter follows on from this by discussing the idea of an immune Self, an idea which once again blurs the line between scientific and political theory. The idea of a clear and detectable distinction between Self and non-Self is a key assumption in immunology, one which Neocleous criticises as “imprecise, nebulous, and [...] atheoretical” (87). Despite significant criticisms of the idea from within immunological research, it “retains its place at the heart of the immunological imagination” (92) at least in part because it confirms our political and philosophical prejudices, reinforcing “a fantasy of agency and will” (ibid.). Moving from early modern philosophers up to the Cold War, Neocleous provides a fascinating and engaging genealogy of the interaction between immunological and securitised discourses of the Self.

Chapter two also considers the political and philosophical implications of auto-immune disorders within the immunity-security paradigm. “Because immunity was imagined as security, the idea that the system could actually harm the very thing it was expected to secure was essentially unimaginable” (112). The political assumptions of immunology, as well as the immunological/security assumptions of politics, significantly hindered scientific research into autoimmune disease, while also stunting the philosophical and political interpretations of immunity, as seen in the writings of Esposito and Derrida. Beyond the political and philosophical discussions of autoimmune disorder, Neocleous captures the significant emotional toll of these illnesses, demonstrating the sense of dread that comes when your immune system turns against you. “In a literal sense, *you do not know who you are*” (121).

This discussion is followed by three chapters on the politics of systems from three different perspectives: the emergence of systems theory, notions of order and entropy within bodies (both human bodies and the body politic), and nervous systems and nervous states. Each of these is, in turn, linked to immunity and securitised politics. The idea of an immune “system” feels so natural to us today that to say that it was “invented” (145) around 1967 feels disconcerting. Nevertheless, there are significant political implications behind the idea of a “system”, a concept which now “seems to flow naturally and seems able to attach itself to everything” (148).

Systems theory has its roots in research on biological organisms in the 1920s and 1930s, subsequently being picked up by the RAND corporation in the 1940s with the express purpose of developing a science of war. “The extent to which modern statecraft and the political administration of capitalist modernity operates through modes of quantification, information, codification and standardization can be seen operating here, in the origin of systems theory” (152). Neocleous moves through the numerous areas

of study that systems theory came to influence, including urban planning, economics, political science, and psychology, among others. He notes its importance for thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek and, most notably, Niklas Luhmann. Ultimately, he writes, the lesson of systems theory “is that we cannot and should not seek to control things. Control is an attribute of the System” (189).

Chapter four considers the central fiction of systems theory: self-regulation. Neocleous considers Enlightenment liberalism and bourgeois political economy through the lens of “systems” thinking and the idea of self-regulation. These modes of thought, he argues, “encourage us to imagine society as constituted through a system of natural liberty operating as a vast, orderly, and living system in which economic behaviour and vital need go hand in hand” (226). Chaos, from this perspective, entails the dissolution of ordered structure. This leads to a uniquely accessible discussion of the political and philosophical implications of entropy and thermodynamics. “The laws of thermodynamics and the concept of entropy point to the disorder in any system and the fact that all systems [...] come to an end” (236). Thus, entropy has been a point of fear for many political thinkers, who have sought the political equivalent of Maxwell’s Demon, an entity capable of violating the law of entropy and thus “able to *govern the system*” (248).

The idea of a political and philosophical fear of entropy and chaos leads us naturally into a discussion of nerves, nervousness, and the nervous system as it relates to immunity and its politics. Once again, systems theory serves as the centre of Neocleous’ critique, specifically its anti-Freudian attempt to reduce the idea of nerves to a singular meaning. For systems theory, nerves are simply means of processing and communicating information; the idea of nervousness in the common sense is completely absent. Systems theory ignores the emotional, subjective, and psychological connotations of nerves such that it makes no sense to say that a system feels nervous.

Neocleous provides a strong counterargument to systems theory here, addressing the social and political implications of nervousness, nervous breakdowns, and burnout. He provides an invaluable political reading of the memoirs of Daniel Paul Schreber, restoring the work’s original intention as a critique of medical incarceration. The chapter wraps up with a discussion of the idea of a state having a nervous breakdown. Moving beyond the journalistic trope – which only ever casts the Western state on the *verge* of breakdown, but never quite there yet – Neocleous argues that in the excessively nervous state the “security system responds [...] by searching for enemies, by finding enemies and by fabricating new enemies” (300). Through this process, he argues, the state, whether Fascist or liberal democratic, can turn self-defence into self-destruction, falling victim to a societal autoimmune disorder.

Finally, the sixth chapter considers immunity as a legal fiction propping up sovereign power, with a particular eye towards the notion of non-combatant immunity in warfare. Here Neocleous engages in a fascinating reconstruction of the genealogy of immunity’s political meaning, moving from its origins in Roman law as a term of privilege, through its seldom discussed medieval developments as implying defence and protection, and on to the emergence of the idea of non-combatant immunity in the eighteenth century. Taking up literature in international law and norms surrounding war,

Neocleous demonstrates that the ideal of non-combatant immunity is in fact a fiction, developed at a period in which “no one in their right mind could ever believe that states would adhere to it” (327). Indeed, rather than protecting civilians, the conclusion we are drawn to is that the securitised notion of immunity is primarily concerned with protecting the state’s right to exercise violence.

Overall, this book is a remarkable piece of scholarship which contributes to a broad spectrum of literature within and beyond contemporary political thought. However, a noticeable absence from its wide-ranging discussions are the subjects of race and colonialism. While these topics do come up on occasion – as when quarantine is described as having been “a means of managing indigenous peoples” (61) or when colonial wars’ status as police operations is deconstructed – they are seldom dwelt upon for long. The points that are raised in relation to race and colonialism are fascinating and would improve the book were they more thoroughly developed, so the brevity with which they are discussed is very disappointing.

Despite this limitation, however, *The Politics of Immunity* will still be of interest to scholars concerned with colonial and neo-colonial violence due to the significant conceptual apparatus it employs. Philosophers and political theorists working in a wide range of research areas will no doubt find significant value in this work, as will more empirically oriented scholars working on political violence and security studies. Ultimately, perhaps the greatest value of this work is that it becomes impossible to unreflexively use certain words and terms which have become completely standard in academic vocabulary. Cell, Self, system, nerve, order, security, and, of course, immunity; the politics underlying these words become clear to the reader such that one cannot read or write them without taking into account the assumptions and implications which Neocleous so astutely highlights in this outstanding work.

Biography

Paul Gorby is a PhD candidate in the School of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews. His thesis develops a critical theory of the dual concepts of police power and vagrancy and applies it to key topics in contemporary political thought, including governmentality, human rights, migration, and constituent power. His work draws on Continental political philosophy, Marxist theory, and the Black radical tradition.