

TOWARDS A THEORY OF SPECIES-LYRIC:
DARWIN, SWINBURNE, BIOPOLITICS

Matthew Rowlinson

In his late work on biopolitics, Michel Foucault describes the two-century long replacement of a politics of sovereignty – where the sovereign’s power is quintessentially the power to kill – by political technology focused on life – where life itself becomes the object that power aims to know and control. In this account, Foucault specifies the nineteenth century as the period when biopower shifts its point of application from the individual body to the population or species as an aggregate. In the lectures from 1975-76 published under the title *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault argues that “power’s hold over life” (239) is one of the basic phenomena of the nineteenth century. “After the ... politics of the human body established in the course of the eighteenth century ... we have what I would call a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race”; this biopolitics is “directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species” (243).

Besides this claim, a second strand of Foucault’s argument also orients my argument in this essay. This strand arises from the relation between species-identity and racism, which is a central topic in the entire series of the 1975-76 lectures:

[R]acism does make the relationship of war – “If you want to live, the other must die” – function in a way that is completely new and ... quite compatible with the exercise of biopower.... [R]acism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other that is not a military or warlike relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship: “The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I – as species rather than individual – can live.” (255)

As the Foucauldian philosopher Roberto Esposito writes, biopolitics always threatens to be reversed into thanatopolitics (39).¹

The genocidal tendency in technologies of power and knowledge in the