

Health without security?

An interview with Mark Neocleous

Mark Neocleous with Sam Kelly

Mark Neocleous is Professor of the Critique of Political Economy at Brunel University London. He is the author of numerous books including War Power, Police Power (2014), Critique of Security (2008), The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism (2005) and A Critical Theory of Police Power (2000). Most recently he has authored The Politics of Immunity: Security and the Policing of Bodies (Verso, 2022), in which he excavates the violent and repressive tendencies underlying the pervasive obsession with immunity in both medicine and politics. He was a member of the editorial collective of Radical Philosophy from 1998 to 2016.

Sam Kelly: How did you become interested in the concept of security?

Mark Neocleous: It began when I was writing a book on the concept of police. I discovered this wonderful line of Marx in his essay on the Jewish question, where he says, ‘Security is the supreme social concept of bourgeois society, the concept of police’.¹ He brought them together in a very direct and immediate way. I thought it was an insightful observation, which gets to the heart of how security underpins everything that is done in the name of police. By using the term police I’m not referring to the narrowest sense of the word, the uniformed, professionalised police services, but the whole range of ways in which the state polices civil society, which is what Marx was alluding to. So, my interest in security originally stems from a critical engagement with the police concept. Since then I have been trying to think them together – more recently, combined with the logic of war, again understood in the broadest sense to incorporate the social wars of capitalist modernity.

Of course, since first working on the idea of security a quarter of a century ago, that very concept has come to dominate political discourse. One sees this in the emergence of a range of ways in which security has been connected with everyday life: the notion of food security, for example, or water security, climate security, and so on. There are a lot of elisions that take place when the language of security gets foregrounded in these ways. Issues such as food, water, climate change, have long been the grounds for radical political struggles, campaigns and activism, but those took place without having to attach the notion of ‘security’ to them. From a critical perspective, attaching ‘security’ to them adds little and offers us nothing. However, it offers politicians and the ruling class a way of talking about this issue without addressing the issues which actually concern us. The talk of food security is not going to get more kids arriving at school with a full stomach, it’s not going to feed more people, but what it does instead is it allows politicians to do other things, most obviously securing supply lines. In other words, what is being satisfied is not a human need, but the needs of capital in ensuring the security of its production and distribution.

In the book on police power, which was originally published in 2000,² a couple of chapters explore the ways in which policing takes place through the idea of order, on the one hand, in the sense that in the cry for ‘law and order’ it is ‘order’ that underpins the police logic, and security, on the other hand. I realised that there was more to say about security and so over the next few years I extended that argument, which became the basis for *Critique of Security*.³ In that book, the critique of police power was ratcheted up to challenge the whole ideology of security. It is a book *against* security, and not simply a book within critical security studies, which purports to be critical but actually ends up as a rethinking of security rather than an actual critique of it. The question is then, what should we be doing instead? And the implication of the argument is that we need a different kind of language for radical politics in general and for critical theory in particular. In other words, I wanted to push the argument that critical theory must involve a critique of security.

SK: I want to come back in a moment to some of your comments about security, but can I first ask you when you began to consider how the question of security extended into medicine and public health?

MN: In the first articulation of my argument about police I discussed the long and fascinating history of what went by the name of medical police. Throughout the early modern period, the idea of medical police was one means through which the state could administer civil society through the lens of health, medicine and public health. It allowed for intervention into the bodies of people and the body of the people, or the ‘social body’, through medicine, management of contagious diseases or improvement of the drainage system to stop cholera, for example. This also had very obvious class dimensions. For example, Edwin Chadwick’s attempt to improve London’s sewers in the early nineteenth century was connected to his other role on the Health Board, and then to his role as police reformer, and these were bound up with his reform of the poor law and the need to police the working class through that law. This history has been obscured by the professionalisation of police forces and what we are encouraged to understand as ‘police’ in the narrow sense, but it has also been lost and replaced by other ways of thinking about how civil society is managed with regard to medicine, with other administrative terms such as public health or the national health service. I’m interested in what happens if we retain the idea of medical police, because we can then connect arguments around public health to a broader account of the ways in which the state administers civil society.

SK: In your most recent book you extend your argument about security and the logic of capitalist property relations to show how this shapes how we imagine our own relationships to our bodies.⁴ Could you elaborate on that and explain how this emerges?

MN: The whole history of liberalism takes its cue from the idea of the property-owning individual. Specifically, that every individual is in some sense a property owner because at the very least they own their own body. As soon as you start thinking about your own body as a form of property you create the possibility of selling it as a commodity, or at least selling its power to labour. Here you have the grounds for wage labour and therefore accumulation and exploitation. But what also emerges is a set of ways of thinking about the body and its relationship to the self. As the individual as a property-owning body or a body as property emerges, so too does the development of certain ideas around selfhood, with concepts such

as self-interest, self-regulation, self-governance and self-defense, all emerging around the same period. There's also self-destruction, which I touch on in this new book, and which opens the space for an argument gleaned from psychoanalysis and the death drive. The body is central to all of these and is also central to our ideas of property ownership.

SK: So why is immunity and the field of immunology so central to this conception of the body within liberal capitalism? What is it about immunity that interests you?

MN: I arrived at the question of immunity partly through the lens of security, but also through a very personal experience. In 2015 I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease and this was very new to me, both as a concept and a process. Unsurprisingly, I started reading up on immunity to try and understand what was going on, mostly through reading popular books on immunity, but also some more advanced medical texts. I was immediately struck by how remarkably political these texts are. I started encountering discussions of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Clausewitz's account of war and George Orwell's description of the totalitarian state. The imagery was consistent: if you want to understand your body, think of it as though it's a security state, of the kind described by Hobbes or Orwell, or as an entity at permanent war against dangerous others. These books were describing immunity through the lens of security, police, war. I suddenly found myself in a strange moment of trying to learn about what was going on in my body and being referred back to texts that I had been reading and teaching for years. In other words, I had for many years been developing a critique of security and then suddenly I was confronted with the idea of immunity as security. At the same time, debates within security politics were undergoing a remarkable immunitarian turn, using the idea of immunity to try and reinforce the drive towards security.

This was connected to a wider issue within the history of ideas. As soon as the body's immune process was discovered in the late nineteenth century, so the way in which the body politic is imagined could be transformed. No longer simply a mechanical body or a body with a nervous system, the body politic could now also be presented to us as either possessing an immune system or being an immune system. So once the idea of immunity was invented as a medical idea – I say medical idea because immunity as a legal idea has a much longer history, which I also discuss in the book – it could quickly come to oscillate back and forth between the physiological and political registers.

So, there was a general issue, concerning immunity and security, but what also concerned me was what this political connection meant for our understanding of the autoimmune disease. Then also, and at the same time, what the idea of an autoimmune disease might tell us about this politics of immunity. Because in the autoimmune disease, the immune system seeks to destroy the very body it is meant to secure.

SK: Can you say a bit more about that, especially given that immunity was already well-covered ground, appearing in the work of other thinkers?

MN: Absolutely. As you suggest, there was already a fair amount of philosophical work on immunity, and I was aware of it to varying degrees. I returned to the thinkers in question, and one thing that struck me was how the autoimmune disease was either ignored or poorly understood and badly integrated into the work. In the work of Luhmann, for example, probably the first writer to really push the idea of the social system as possessing an immune system, he is so taken by the idea of autopoiesis that he has to completely ignore the fact

of the autoimmune disease. For Luhmann, the social system simply protects itself and secures itself in an autopoietic fashion against social infections such as protest and resistance, in a way that immunises the system against further threats. And because of this, the autoimmune disease simply cannot be addressed, so you end up with a social theory of immunity that has nothing to say about the immune process going wrong. In similar fashion, Sloterdijk's interest in architectures of immunity and what he calls spatialised immune systems also veers him away from the autoimmune disease.⁵ He occasionally notes that the search for security sometimes drives the immune process into auto-immune pathologies, but he can't pursue that line of argument because it would thoroughly undermine his own account of immunological spheres of protection as a defensive basis for what he likes to call 'co-immunism'.



More complicated is the work of Esposito, who has really pushed the idea of using the idea of immunity to reimagine our concepts of community, arguing for a new philosophical paradigm of immunisation with the kind of conceptual weight previously attached to concepts such as secularisation or rationalisation.⁶ Esposito does at least address the autoimmune disease, but his understanding of it is odd, to say the least. Because his interest lies in protection, he tends to focus on the border and when the body or body politic is penetrated. This question of borders allows him to reinforce the idea of immunisation as a process, to the point where he complicates the fundamental differences between immunisation and the autoimmune disease. For example, he talks about the autoimmune disease turning against itself as an immune system.

In reading these texts it struck me that they were so committed to a paradigm of immunity and immunisation that they could not recognise what seems to me to be a rather important political point about security: that if the immune process is the body's security system, then the autoimmune disease is the body's security system turning against the very thing it is meant to secure.

Derrida at least takes seriously the idea of autoimmunity, although somewhat problematically tends to conflate autoimmunity with autoimmune disease.⁷ They are not the same thing. Autoimmunity is in fact a normal immune function to help maintain the body's optimal state. To put it bluntly, autoimmunity is a normal feature of the immune process without which one dies, whereas an autoimmune disease is a failure of the immune process which will eventually help kill you. This conflation undermines some of Derrida's insights about the terrifying features of autoimmunity, as it leads him to sometimes talk about the self being infected, and to sometimes treat the autoimmune disease as an attack on the body's immune system in a way that confuses autoimmune disorders with immunodeficiency disorders such as HIV/AIDS. That said, Derrida's work in this field at least alerts us to what he calls the terrifying idea of a threat within the body politic.

It is also the case that in the medical literature, no one has a real explanation for the autoimmune disease. Immunologists are as perplexed by the autoimmune disease as the philosophers. This is perhaps evident in the way that both the medical and the philosophical

literature tend to use phrases such as ‘civil war’ or ‘coup’ to try and capture what is at stake in an autoimmune disease. But neither term really works. There is no civil war, in the sense of two sides fighting, and there is no coup, in the sense of the body being taken over. So, what I do in the book is pursue the idea of autoimmune disease as self-destruction and hence a manifestation of the death drive – in which case, imagined politically, the autoimmune disease can be understood as the suicidal self-destruction of the body politic in the name of security.

What the autoimmune disease does is alert us to a situation in which the body is damaged and destroyed from within by its own system of immunity-security, and a parallel in which the body politic is damaged and ultimately destroyed from within by its own security-immunity. What I try and do in the book, then, is to use the autoimmune disease to confront security’s destructive power.

SK: How did the COVID-19 pandemic alter your research?

MN: I had already done the bulk of thinking and writing when COVID-19 hit. As you know, COVID-19 pushed the idea of immunity onto the front pages of every media outlet from that point onwards. Obviously, this was not about the autoimmune disease, but it foregrounded the connection between the immunity of the individual human body and the immunity of the system. In other words, it reinforced the idea of our bodies as part and parcel of the body politic and that the immunity of both go hand in hand. This is what was most obviously entailed by those early debates about ‘herd immunity’. And the implication of this became clear, which is that the security of our bodies is wrapped up in the security of the body politic. This made explicit the role of securing the social system from utter collapse by securing our own individual bodies from this thing called COVID-19. We as individual subjects of the system are embedded within it, embodied within it, and are also the very thing that keeps it going. For this reason, the state was falling over itself to keep us alive, because otherwise the system was in genuine crisis. The system meaning the capitalist system.

SK: Do you really think the state was desperate to keep us all alive, because it didn’t really feel like it?

MN: No, I don’t. I think the biggest mistake we can ever make is to think that the state cares about us. It only cares about us as a resource. It cares about us as a resource used for the continuation of the system. That’s what the state is interested in. As much as the politicians were talking about keeping people alive, what they were really focused on was keeping the health system going. They needed to keep the health system going, to keep people alive, yes, but because if the health system collapsed it would be an even bigger problem than COVID-19. Remember: ‘protect the NHS’. This is one reason to think of it through the lens of medical police. But we can also think about this another way. As we speak, people are still dying in large numbers and people are still being hospitalised in large numbers, but the system now seems to be back largely on an even keel. The politicians have got the health service to a place where it’s creaking but surviving, just, and for them ‘just enough’ is good enough because it is just enough in its role as a sub-system of The System as a whole. This explains why there was so much talk about COVID-19 becoming the new normal, as endemic rather than a pandemic. Herein lies the comparison that is always made with flu, and from

a critical perspective we can draw out the implications of what is going on when we are encouraged to think of it this way. The point about COVID-19 becoming endemic in the way that flu is, is as follows. In the UK, there are around 8,000 deaths a year from flu, with a bad year seeing closer to 20,000 deaths. The system can cope with an average of 8,000 deaths, rising to 20,000 in a bad year. And it can especially cope given that those deaths are generally either of the older generation or have some kind of other illness which weakens them – like an autoimmune disease, for example. This is what we are moving to with COVID-19. The message is clear: x number of deaths per year will be normal, y number of deaths per year will be difficult but manageable, now stop worrying and get back to work. To return to your question: no, the state wasn't desperate to keep us alive, it was desperate to keep the system alive, but it needs enough of us alive to work the system.

SK: Returning to the pervasive nature of security, do you think the left (however we might describe it in its current formation) has developed a sufficient critique of security in its response to COVID-19?

MN: The left has always had a major philosophical political problem in thinking about the state. Despite an extended history of the critique of the state, the critique of political power and the relationship between state and capital, large parts of the left still tend to think of the state as the solution. In that context the concept of security is interesting because, to put it crudely, some forms of security are considered by the left to be ok and others not. For example, and again to put it crudely: national security bad, social security good. Yet it's difficult to separate these things out because, for the state, they operate on the same terrain. The concept of national security that emerged following the Second World War, for example, was modelled directly on the concept of social security that was developed between the two world wars, and for a very good reason: the earlier concept had shown what could be undertaken by the state in the name of security and, moreover, through the very same logic of emergency. Both social and national security are about policing the system. Secondly, it's very hard to concede ground to the logic of security in one area and then resist it in another, given the centrality of the state to the security industry and its ideology. Which returns us to my earlier point, about the pull of the notion of security, that it seemingly becomes irresistible.

We could look at this another way, through some of the most radical demands being made by different movements at the moment in the form of abolition politics. For example, in the US, the demands being made around police abolition are quite remarkable. The very slogan, never mind the struggles, is a stunning challenge to the state and the way it envisions social order, and it's a real shame that those demands are not being replicated elsewhere. However, one of the difficulties is precisely that instead of challenging the whole logic of security, they tend towards asking for other ways of imagining security. In other words, they're still on the terrain of security, only asking that it be 'reconceptualised'. What I'd really like to see is police abolition rolled up into a wider idea of security abolition. In a sense, what is at stake here is whether we are thinking about institutions or imaginations.

SK: Can you explain that a little more?

MN: Much of abolition politics focuses on an institution: police abolition, say, or prison abolition. These are incredibly radical demands, and ones we should be making, and it is

even more radical to then think about other linked demands, such as debt abolition. But my desire is to see them rolled up into a broader program of security abolition because this asks broader questions about why those institutions exist in the first place. And that requires a broader argument about capital and the state. This is what the critique of security aims to do, which is why it mobilises a broader concept of police power, beyond the police institution and against police power in general. What this means is that instead of merely targeting an institution such as the police or the prison, security abolition demands something else from us. It demands a different way of imagining politics. It's not just about particular institutions. It's about the political imagination as a whole. Security abolition demands imagining politics beyond security.

SK: What might this look like in the sphere of health and medicine?

MN: As we said earlier, throughout the pandemic we've witnessed the advance of arguments about health security along with food security, water security, and so on. The concept of health security wasn't entirely new in 2020, but it's been pushed to the forefront by COVID-19. In the UK, we now have the Health Security Agency (HSA) which claims on its website

that it aims to provide intellectual, scientific and operational leadership to secure the nation's health. It's significant that the HSA has a three-letter acronym that reminds us of the NSA: health security as mirror image of national security. Their organisational model and their response systems are designed explicitly to mirror the structures for responding to terrorist attacks. The first implication of what I'm saying is that we should be trying to think about health outside of the frame of security. We're not interested in health security; we're interested in health. Then again, perhaps it might be even more valuable to reconsider health itself as a concept. Because, to return to our earlier discussion, it's applied to us as a way of making us think about our own bodies as workers. We are to be made 'fit for work',



as the British medical system likes to describe us. Not fit for life, not fit for pleasure, but fit for work. This is 'the health unto death' to which Adorno alludes in the section with that title in *Minima Moralia*.⁸ Critical theory needs to show the sickness of the system, not the sickness of the self. It needs to build on the idea that work makes us sick, that illness is itself a weapon against the system. We easily forget that the only reason the health system exists under capitalism is to keep us healthy for work. So beyond struggling against health security, maybe we need to be thinking beyond health as a category. Or at least, to resist a notion of health that is imposed on us by the state in the name of capital.

One way to think about this is through some of recent arguments about a politics of care. Modern capitalism wants to insist on the idea of health, and we instinctively feel that

this makes sense, but what if we were to instead ask: 'health for what?'. Health tends to position us within what Foucault calls the doctor-patient couple. Alternately, or alongside that couple, it imposes upon us a notion of self-responsibility – eat your 5 a day, do your exercise, drink less. But what if we eschew health and ask instead about care? Health points us towards labour, on the one hand, or to cure, on the other hand, a key feature of the doctor-patient couple. One seeks a cure for whatever it is that is rendering one unable to labour. Donald Winnicott somewhere makes the point that cure and care were once intimately connected, but in modernity cure started to become medicalised, increasingly narrowing into a term for medical treatment. My sense is that the politics of care could pursue the idea of care over cure. But here's the thing that interests me as well, to go back to that problem of health security: security in its origins meant someone who was free from care, and this was a negative state. After all, who could want to be free from care? My own thinking is that within the critique of security there lies a critique of health and an argument for something like 'care not cure' as the grounds of sociability. And 'care not cure' might, in turn, help move us away from medical police.

SK: It can be difficult to consider how to manage a pandemic whilst maintaining a critique of security. Various groups are attempting this and some have arrived at very reactionary positions that valorise free market dynamics, demanding business as usual with no medical intervention from the state. What are your thoughts on that political current?

MN: There is to be sure a certain kind of madness to the anti-vax position in the degrees that some of the arguments go to suggest COVID-19 is completely fabricated. But I do think there is something interesting in the lower levels of suspicion that some people have, which shouldn't be disregarded simply because it's based on idiotic ideas about viruses and bodies. It's also important to remember that there is a long history of admirable campaigns by working-class communities against medical policing. The term 'conscientious objector' comes to us from the original working-class struggles against vaccination in their communities. Again, they may well have misunderstood the science, but they had a sense that there was something problematic about this. After all, why wouldn't we be suspicious of an officer of the state coming to penetrate our bodies and inject us with a chemical about which we know nothing?

What interests me most, however, is that one of the many strands of the anti-vax position is remarkably consistent with a major strand in liberal philosophy. I'm using liberal in the broadest sense here, but the liberal position (or neoliberal, if you'd prefer it, given the time of COVID-19), is that bodies



are self-regulating or they should be left to be self-regulating. Let the system do what it's going to do. This aspect of anti-vax politics appear to us as slightly crazed, but it actually has deep roots in classical liberal thought, and it connects with the wider arguments made against lockdown. It involves a profound belief in laissez-faire as the highpoint of the myth of self-regulation. If you are consistent with the idea that society is self-regulating, that the social body and individual bodies will naturally find their balance, then they really should be left alone. Obviously, this strand of liberalism as it was articulated in relation to COVID-19 had a certain kind of madness about it, but it certainly taps into something that is worth thinking about in terms of how we imagine bodies, if only so we can better challenge it.

SK: This reminds me of the story you repeat in *The Politics of Immunity*, concerning Adam Smith's advice to David Hume, shortly before the latter's passing, which bears an uncanny resemblance to many of the right's responses to the pandemic.

MN: Absolutely, yes, and it was one reason for including it. In the middle of 1776 David Hume was very ill and mentioned to Smith that he was going to travel to Bath to sample the mineral waters as a way of managing his illness. Smith's advice to him was to the effect that a mineral water is as much a drug as any that comes out of the apothecaries and is likely to produce the same violent effects upon the body as a more drastic intervention, and might even produce an even worse disease. So, rather than intervening with something as mild as spa waters, never mind professionally 'doctoring' his body, Smith recommends Hume follows a more 'natural' or 'balanced' path, nothing more interventionist than a change of air and some moderate exercise. Ultimately, he says, Hume should simply let the power of nature do its job. Hume was talking about something as mild as taking some time in spa waters and Smith just says, no, that's way much too interference. A few weeks later Hume was dead. I included it in the book because it captures in part what was going on in the eighteenth century, when liberals such as Smith were talking about needing to avoid doctoring the system, out of which I was trying to get to the heart of how we imagine systems as bodies and bodies as systems. But I also included it because it takes us to the heart of some recent liberal responses to lockdown.

SK: On the question of systems, you dedicate a large part of your recent book to a discussion of systems. Is the system an inherently repressive concept or is there revolutionary potential there?

MN: That is a tricky question but also a good one. We're attached to the idea of systems and The System and, continuing from your previous question about classical liberalism, we are attached to the idea of systems that function. But of course, we are constantly confronted time and again with system failure, with systems that let us down or get jammed. We have a perpetual frustration with systems, which also extends to our bodies, which we are expected to imagine as a system of systems. We find ourselves daunted by the power of systems, lost in a world of systems. So then we are forced into confronting the question that I think is behind the one you ask: can you have a critical theory of society without the concept of system? And if we can't do without it, what are we going to do with it? Specifically, how can we employ it in ways that don't encourage us to think of ourselves as lost in them. Can we fight the system and are we able to control the system?

SK: That tension seems to coalesce around the question of closed systems versus open systems.

MN: The only interesting systems are open systems. Because that makes them changeable. Open systems have entry points and orifices. They're leaky and permeable. They have cracks.

SK: Does the changeable nature of open systems prevent them from becoming naturalised as easily? Meaning we might be less likely to subordinate ourselves to their demands?

MN: I think there are two ways in which the notion of naturalisation might play out in that instance. I'm not sure which of them you're getting at, but maybe it's both. One way is the belief we are encouraged to hold, that the system in which we live is natural – that this system is the natural way that human beings organise. We are naturally property owners by virtue of owning our body, to go back to our earlier conversation, and we are naturally geared towards seeking more wealth, more money, more property ownership. We are naturally individualists. That's why the capitalist system is so easily presented to us as natural. Then there's another way of considering the relationship between system and naturalisation, which is we are encouraged to think of our bodies as systems and as a system of systems. In other words, systems operate within us. We are a system. In both cases, we are encouraged to think of systems as natural. The outcome is that when we imagine the capitalist system, we are encouraged to imagine it as natural. This is what underpins what Adorno calls the frenzy of systems that runs through modernity.

The notion of system then gets compounded, and we find ourselves lost in this world of systems, despite the fact that we hold on to the idea of system a category for critique. And to return to a previous point, the question is then whether the system is self-regulating or can be managed. Is our immune system self-regulating or do we need to manage it and police it through various forms of intervention? Is the capitalist system generally self-regulating, as some claim, or is it being policed? In this way, the notion of system throws up the problematic question of human control.

SK: Yet it's not clear to me why you attribute the position that bodies should be left to self-regulate instead of receiving medical intervention to (neo-)liberalism. Isn't this the definition of ancient Hippocratic medicine? But also, is Smith really relevant to this, given that when self-regulation in a modern sense is discovered by Claude Bernard in the nineteenth century, it is not opposed to intervention? The active physiologist is considered essential in assisting the return of a pathological body to a normal homeostatic state. And when cybernetics reinvigorates this position in the twentieth century, it only does so to conceive of means to artificially extend the normal capacities of an organism, not at all to leave them be.

MN: Well, in relation to the Hippocratic tradition, the answer is yes, absolutely, though it was considered through the lens of balance rather than self-regulation. Moreover, the history of this, like all histories, is not straightforward. One of the predominant themes in modern biological thinking is the idea of war – a war on this or that disease, a constant battle in which are permanently defending ourselves against the world. The prevalence of this idea came to the fore once again during COVID-19. A few people objected to it, but the language seems so natural to us that it's hard to resist it. Moreover, the language of warfare helped

underpin the logic of emergency under which lockdown was to operate. Yet this military mode of thinking about bodies is not central to the Hippocratic tradition, nor the Galenic one which followed. One finds it here and there, for example in the work of Thomas Campanella and Thomas Sydenham, but the major framework for a long time concerned a balance between the four humours. Disease was then a sign of a lack of physiological balance rather than physiological warfare, and re-balancing was part of the healing power of nature. This has its parallel in the political discourse concerning the body politic, which also focused heavily on the idea of a 'balance', either balancing between the classes, or the balance of powers, or balance of forces. The body politic might suffer from pestilence, or consumption or weakness, but these are indications of an imbalance. The key point is that the idea of war against disease does not really become central until the second half of the nineteenth century, at which point balance and healing were overtaken by ideas about war and conflict. What's known as the 'germ war theory of disease' emerged out of the research of Pasteur in France and Koch in Germany. It also became part of the immunological literature that emerged in the very late nineteenth century, in the work of Metchnikoff and others.

In relation to self-regulation in what you call the modern sense, I don't agree with you about it being discovered in the nineteenth century. Yes, as a physiological idea, it gets talked about in the nineteenth century, but self-regulation was one of those 'self-x' terms that emerged in the seventeenth century, not least through the influence of Locke and the general bourgeois notion of selfhood, out of which we see the emergence of ideas about self-formation, self-ownership, self-government, self-reliance, and many of the other 'self-x' terms, including the one we are discussing, self-regulation. Only in the nineteenth century does self-regulation become a physiological idea.

It's worth noting here that the concept of 'self' is one of immunology's key terms, along with 'system', but it is precisely this focus on selfhood, the idea of an immune self and the idea of the body having a process that is inherently geared towards defending the self, that meant immunology for years simply denied that an autoimmune disease was possible. The idea of the body turning against itself was anathema. The term for this, coined early in the history of immunology by Paul Ehrlich, was 'horror autotoxicus', literally a fundamental horror at the very idea of self-toxicity. Ehrlich proposed this at the very end of the nineteenth century, and it dominated immunology for decades. After all, to confront the idea of autotoxicus would be to confront the very possibility of self-destruction, an issue which too many people like to avoid, since to confront it would be to confront the death drive.

One last point on this. The truth to always remember is that behind Smith's notion of self-regulating systems lies the hidden hand. Very rare was it then, or is it now, for self-regulation to be imagined without such a force. This applies to self-regulation across the whole range of its applications. When Smith was teaching at Glasgow in the 1760s, James Watt was working there on the inefficiency of Newcomen engines, and the two became friends. By the time the *Wealth of Nations* is published, Watt was finishing the development of a feedback system to enable the regulation of steam. This steam engine was understood to be of revolutionary importance, often taken to be the beginning of the industrial age, and people came from miles around to see it. Why? Because it was thought to be a self-regulating system. But what name did Watt give to this feedback system? The centrifugal Governor. Behind every supposedly self-regulating system, we should always look for the governing force. The genius of liberalism is to make this force appear invisible. In one sense, the project of critical theory has been to make such force visible, to spell out how the system

is being governed. But I also mention Watt because you refer to cybernetics, and it's worth remembering that this term has its roots in the ancient Greek word *kybernetikos*, referring to the 'steering' of a ship, which comes to be rendered in the Latin as *gubernator*, and then in English as 'Governor'. The point is that not only should we be looking for the cracks in the system, but we also need to determine its governing force, to make visible the forces behind it.

SK: Perhaps this is a similar question to the question of systems, but where do we go now with the field of immunology? If critical theory must use the theories of immunology, how can we make use of them?

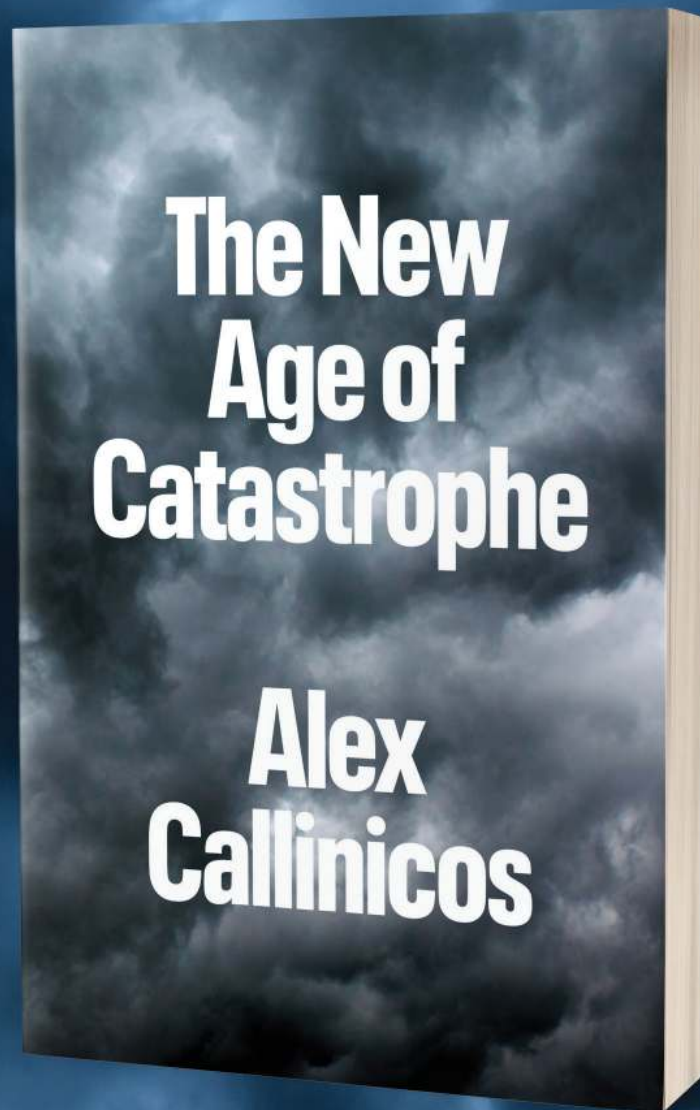
MN: There are some incredibly important developments taking place within immunology which I think are politically useful. As immunology emerged as a medical science, throughout the postwar period, some immunologists increasingly started to try and imagine the immune system in conjunction with the nervous system and the hormonal system. It took some time to develop and went under different names at different points, but has increasingly in the last 30 years coalesced around the idea of psychoneuroimmunology. As a field it is interested in the immune system in connection with the neurological system, but also in connection to the psychic field. It's an important development because its central claim is that we can't understand immune processes without understanding neurological processes, but that we also need to connect this idea to the psyche. This field has generated some interesting works, which you can see in the title of books such as *The Inflamed Mind*. What is at stake in this is the possibility of connecting immunity with the idea of nerves, and 'nerves' in the double sense of the physiological nervous system, on the one hand, and a psychically nervous reaction, on the other. In relation to the body, this is generating new and exciting insights into the autoimmune disease, to take us back to a point we have already mentioned in that it connects the autoimmune disease to the death drive via the idea of the nervous state, often understood through a range of other related terms such as burnout, exhaustion, stress, breakdown. One of the last things Freud said not long before he died was that the psyche is somatic, but it just doesn't actually know it. This then allows us to think through the question of security and the body politic: the possibility of imagining the body politic's overreaction in the name of security as a product of the nervous state, the state on the verge of a nervous breakdown. In effect, it allows us to get a political purchase on two ideas – the nervous state and the immune state – and to think of these in terms of the state's overreaction in the name of security, to the point where the state starts destroying its own body politic. The immune state and the nervous state combine in a suicidal politics.

Philosophically speaking, plenty of thinkers have had things to say about the suicidal state, but the work has been restricted to historical periods or reactionary movements. Foucault, Virilio, Deleuze and Guattari, for example, have all talked about fascism as essentially suicidal, and I pushed this idea in relation to fascism in *The Monstrous and the Dead*.⁹ My point in *The Politics of Immunity* is that it is if there is any critical purchase on the idea of a suicidal state, it should not be restricted to fascism, but applied to the work performed by the body politic in the name of security-immunity. In seeking to secure itself, it destroys itself. This is our slow death, in the name of security, and why we need to imagine politics differently.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question' (1844), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 163.
2. Mark Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).
3. Mark Neocleous, *Critique of Security* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).
4. Mark Neocleous, *Politics of Immunity: Security and the Policing of Bodies* (London: Verso, 2022).
5. Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, trans. Weland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).
6. Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).
7. Jacques Derrida, 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida', in Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
8. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2002).
9. Mark Neocleous, *The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005).





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