

# **Tactical Biopolitics**

Art, Activism, and Technoscience

**edited by Beatriz da Costa and Kavita Philip  
with a foreword by Joseph Dumit**

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## Foreword: Biological Feedback

When I first looked over *Tactical Biopolitics*, I was excited by the array of authors and the fact that this was not a book retheorizing biopolitics or talking about intervening. These were accounts by interveners, reports on practices. Most important, these were conversations between scientists, artists, theorists, and activists; conversations in the field, struggling over new practices of life. Talking across these divisions of life is not easy at all; at best it is usually what Deleuze approvingly calls a resonant encounter in which “one discipline realizes that it has to resolve, for itself and by its own means, a problem similar to one confronted by the other.”<sup>1</sup> I like Deleuze’s image here, but it is a solitary endeavor. *Tactical Biopolitics* is oriented differently, toward a shared set of problems that do not require discovering because they are in the face of practitioners. These include the recognition that the multiplicities of life have their own designs, even if, especially when, we try to manipulate them on micro and nano scales. These multiplicities also include the increasing entanglement of all practices—science, art, activism, writing—with corporate capital and mass media, and the belated admission that these problems cannot be handled alone, but require cross-species tactical coordination.

The choice to call the volume *Tactical Biopolitics* is intriguing because it resists the urge to come up with another name for the present that would spin us off into lexical appreciation and distract us from the tasks at hand: where to put a hazardous bioengineering lab, how to manage corporate sponsorship of bioart, how to decide the social limits of a research practice, how to know when animal research goes too far, how to teach about race and biology when students have learned their ancestry through online genetic testing services, how much biology artists or activists need to learn, and how much social theory should biologists acquire. In other words, how to be a biological citizen today. As a foreword, I offer a few take-home tactics that I acquired while reading:

Microbiopolitical tactic: Never think you know all of the species involved in a decision. Corollary: Never think you speak for all of yourself.

Foucault identified the biopolitical as the shift to population and territory as key problems for society: how to control and secure the multiplicity of men as living bodies, as populations, as global mass; modulating rates of life through birth control strategies or death through epidemic preventions. These were ways of anticipating, modeling, and intervening in generalities conducted from expert and managerial levels.

But life, it seems, doesn't react so much as invent responses, appearing like a mold in the interstices of plans and models. Drug-resistant tuberculosis, for instance, is not simply an evasion of epidemic management, but a new type of threat that thrives on prevention strategies. From AIDS to Mad Liberation movements, the problem of man in his environment has been overwritten by the problem of man as environment. Equally, stem cells are not simply a technical solution to organ shortages, but reconfigure how we think of both research and the future of humanity. I am reminded of Heather Paxson's study of artisan cheesemakers in the United States. Focusing on what she calls the "microbiopolitics . . . human encounters with the vital organismic agencies of bacteria, viruses, and fungi," she described how "cheesemakers . . . take quite seriously the fact that they work with a potential biohazard."<sup>2</sup> Feedback here traverses bodies at multiple scales. From SARS to the long history of dog-human co-living, life's multiplicities are more than scientific management can handle. Even discussing our future requires more than gathering diverse humans to a table. Microbes, etc., become not just allies to be enrolled, but subjects in their own right, enrolling humans in their projects. As this *TB* volume makes clear, if before population was posed as a political and biological problem, today biology itself is a political problem.

Cosmopolitical tactic: Expertise confines problems as much as it defines them. How ever hard the homework, we all need to become biologists, activists, artists, and theorists. It is possible and imperative.

The implosion of biology as science into politics is a symptom of a larger entanglement: a doctor treating AIDS, a patient taking a pill, a scientist in a lab, a new professor buying a house, breathing polluted air are part of relations that create new allies and mutate the notion of expert at the same time. In these pages, a biologist repeats that biology is just as political as anything else. At the same time, artists, activists, and writers confront the problem of politics requiring biology. Bioartists articulate life to make biology an object of recognition and concern for all; activists reconfigure lines of authority, knowledge, and regulation to change how concern about life operates. This reformatting of expertise invents a do-it-yourself (DIY) science, and it can be DIY Big Science too: from ancestral

DNA testing to bioterrorism to bioengineering. But it can also be infrastructural science as when Beatriz da Costa works with pigeon-machine hybrids to gather data on lived air pollution at levels that current state instruments don't gather. She is simultaneously artist, activist, scientist, and science studies scholar.

The multiple layers of response in all of these projects require a suspicion of science as usual, but also activism, art, and theory as usual. The requirement is to explore relations across species and scales. However, flourishing with some species—dogs, mice, microbes—demands entanglements that also work against other species. This problem cannot be formulated as life versus the state or capital, but which lives, which biodiversity? As Isabelle Stengers points out, one must put oneself at risk.<sup>3</sup> The only choice that is off the table is allowing questions of liveliness and diversity to be seen as technical, to be decided off-stage.

Bioremediation tactic: Never assume that facts can speak for themselves, and that a reasonable position won't require a hard sell, especially if it is scientific.

Engaging across these levels and relations raises immediate, in-your-face practical issues of tactical media as well. Almost every actor in this book emphasizes the need to format their facts via public relations, and the need to struggle with the constant pressure on these facts from corporate, governmental and other corners. Popularization and commercialization, entertainment and intellectual property, inhabit art, science, activism, and scholarship. This is a shared problem of how to manage hype and how to comprehend and take responsibility for the complications that financial allies bring with them. Financial security is often at odds with financed security.

At the same time, the bio-hype and the hyper-real fear of biohazards are not wrong. The security model that depends on modulating rates and ensuring against randomness must treat events as regular occurrences against a background of noise. But the very premise of bioengineering is that events are disruptive of prior systems; viral mutations as well as activism can transform whole ecologies. Microbes and viruses are bioengineers too.

In addition to these tactics, what I learn from *Tactical Biopolitics* is that it is imperative to talk across expert lines, and perhaps more important, to learn across them. The compelling conclusion of this book is that biologists and biology students need to learn art and politics, social science, and feminism as well as law and business. Politicians and business majors need to learn biology and art and feminism and sociology. It sounds like a lot of homework, but this book is a great start on the learning and makes clear that home and work have both been seriously mutating during the past few decades. Artists, sociologists, scientists, activists, science fiction writers, historians, all find that their worlds have thoroughly infected each other. There is quite simply no space outside the laboratory, no space

that isn't kin to a lab, and no part of the lab that isn't a site of social, political, and artistic regulation and invention. It is no longer a question of what to know, but how to handle the increasing demands that everyone must get their hands dirty, pay more attention, and do it yourself.

Joseph Dumit

### Notes

1. Deleuze, Gilles, "The Brain Is the Screen: An Interview with Gilles Deleuze," translated by Marie Therese Guirgis, in 2000, *The brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, edited by Gregory Flaxman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 367.
2. Paxson, Heather, "Post-Pasteurian Cultures: The Microbiopolitics of Raw Milk Cheese in the United States," *Cultural Anthropology*, 23(1)(2008).
3. Stengers, Isabelle, "Cosmopolitiques, 7 tomes" (Paris: La Découverte & Les Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond 97, 1996).