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Afterword. Bodies impolitic

An archaeology of liminal subjectivities between margins, politics, and academia

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ABSTRACT: This afterword examines the concept of “bodies impolitic” as a heuristic tool for analysing liminal subjectivities situated between marginality, governance, and embodied resistance. Starting from Michael Herzfeld’s original formulation, it reconstructs a broader genealogy through Agamben, Foucault, Mbembe, Butler, Ahmed, Puar, Das and Poole. The essay assesses both the analytical strength and the conceptual risks of the category, especially its tendency toward overextension. It then tests the concept against the ethnographic contributions collected in the issue, showing how marginal bodies expose the unstable boundaries of politics, care, citizenship, and recognition.

KEYWORDS: BODIES IMPOLITIC, LIMINALITY, BIOPOLITICS, MARGINALITY, EMBODIED RESISTANCE

Introduction

I accepted the generous invitation to write about the project presented in this thematic section of *Anuac* with a certain amount of hesitation. For both personal and professional reasons, I have become increasingly sceptical about the heuristic (or even political) value of so-called “critical thinking”, that form of radical cratophobia which grips much of contemporary social sciences, where claims to being “up-to-date” often rely on their ability to expose hidden mechanisms of power (Vereni 2021). I could have excused myself by saying that Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* project (and all that derives from or orbits around it) is not exactly my cup of tea, as the English would say. Yet my original role as discussant of the papers, followed by a careful reading of the essays, convinced me that not everything is rotten in the state of Denmark: there was real value in exploring the concept of “body impolitic” as both a heuristic tool and a theoretical perspective. Respect and friendship for the originator of the term “body impolitic” – whose ethnographic insight always deserves serious attention – further motivated me to take on this task.

The concept of “bodies impolitic” originates in Michael Herzfeld’s *The Body Impolitic* (2004), where marginal artisans in Rethymno, Crete, are analysed as figures caught between global devaluation and the stubborn persistence of embodied practice. In the essays collected here, however, the concept is extended beyond Herzfeld’s initial formulation. It comes to designate a broader field of liminal bodies, lives and practices that are only partially recognised by political, economic, medical, national or moral orders. My purpose in this paragraph is therefore not to reconstruct a full intellectual genealogy, but to sketch the minimum theoretical frame needed for the discussion that follows, while keeping it anchored in the ethnographic materials assembled in this issue.

A first strand comes from Giorgio Agamben’s theory of bare life (Agamben 1995). The body impolitic is, in this sense, a life included in the political order only through exclusion: exposed to law while deprived of full protection. The refugee, the detainee, the undocumented person and the inhabitant of spaces of exception reveal the fragility of an order that proclaims universal rights while anchoring them in citizenship, documentation and recognised belonging. This logic is clearly at work in Marilungo’s analysis of illegalised mobility across the Balkan Route, where racialised bodies are not simply outside Europe, but actively produced by the European border regime as governable, disposable and yet politically disruptive presences. It also resonates

with Solimene's material, where Roma families inhabit spaces that are neither fully tolerated nor simply excluded, but held in a shifting relation of abandonment, surveillance and intermittent violence.

A second strand derives from Michel Foucault's analysis of biopower. Modern power does not merely threaten death; it administers life, health, reproduction, conduct and productivity (Foucault 1976). Yet this care for life always contains a selective threshold: some lives are protected, others monitored, confined, exposed or abandoned. Ledderucci's essay on the Régiment du Service Militaire Adapté in Mā'ohi Nui/French Polynesia offers a precise ethnographic example of this ambivalence: Indigenous youth become highly visible as objects of welfare, military discipline and vocational training, while the colonial and socio-economic conditions that make them "struggling youth" remain partially obscured. Their bodies are incorporated through posture, uniform, discipline and employability, but this incorporation never fully erases negotiation, hesitation and small forms of refusal.

Achille Mbembe radicalises the Foucauldian frame through necropolitics (Mbembe 2003), shifting attention to colonial and postcolonial zones where sovereignty produces death-worlds and forms of life-in-death. Puar's work on debility and the "right to maim" (Puar 2017) further specifies this logic: power need not only kill; it may also weaken, injure and maintain populations in conditions of diminished futurity. This frame is especially relevant to Marilungo's account of pushbacks, dispossession and confinement, but also to Antinori and Becatti's analysis of transgender migrant sex workers in Rome, whose bodies are simultaneously rejected, consumed, exploited and made available within liminal economies that connect migration, sexuality, housing precarity and urban "decency."

Judith Butler adds a different register, centered on vulnerability, recognition and grievability (Butler 2004, 2009). The body impolitic is not only a body governed or abandoned; it is also a body whose suffering does not fully count, whose death does not become a shared loss, whose exposure fails to summon public obligation. The research currently being developed by Colombo and Malatto occupies a slightly different position from the other contributions discussed here. Although it is not part of the group of essays published together with this postface, it belongs fully to the same thematic and theoretical conversation, and I therefore refer to it in the present analysis as a work in progress that may find an appropriate venue for publication in the near future. Its inclusion here is thus intended to preserve the broader theoretical coherence of the project,

since the essay extends with particular clarity the question of bodies impolitic into the clinical field. There, the body impolitic is the patient who resists diagnostic capture: the body that does not cooperate, remains silent, repeats symptoms, or exceeds the classificatory structure of medical knowledge. In this case, impoliticity is not merely political exclusion; it is also epistemic excess.

Ahmed and Puar further complicate the picture by showing that exclusion is not always simple expulsion. Ahmed's work on orientation, whiteness and affective economies (Ahmed 2006, 2007) helps us understand bodies made "out of place" in spaces organised around invisible norms. Buonvino's analysis of Amazigh performances in Moroccan festivals is instructive here: Berber bodies are displayed, choreographed, celebrated and commodified as national heritage, but this visibility remains politically ambivalent, since it can both domesticate difference and open micro-spaces of resistance. Puar's concept of homonationalism (Puar 2007, 2013) clarifies a related mechanism: inclusion may itself become tactical and conditional. Antinori and Becatti show this in the lives of transgender migrant women whose gendered difference can be recognised by humanitarian or asylum regimes, while their migrant, racialised and labouring bodies remain exposed to illegality, debt, sexual economies and housing blackmail.

Finally, Das and Poole's anthropology of the margins of the state (2004) brings this vocabulary back to ethnographic concreteness. Margins are not peripheral residues, but privileged sites for understanding how the state is produced through illegibility, documentation, violence and negotiated authority. The essays in this issue confirm this. Ornella's caravan in Solimene's account, the clinic in Colombo and Malatto, the RSMA in Ledderucci, the Balkan Route in Marilungo, the festivals of Sefrou in Buonvino, and the sexual and urban margins of Rome in Antinori and Becatti are all threshold spaces. They show that bodies impolitic are not bodies without politics. They are bodies through which the limits of politics, care, citizenship, recognition and knowledge become visible. The usefulness of the concept will therefore depend on its ethnographic discipline: whether it helps us see, in concrete cases, how bodies are made governable, how they resist being fully captured, and how they disclose the unstable boundaries of the political itself.

The analytical and theoretical scope of the concept

The idea of the body impolitic has several analytical strengths. Its first advantage is also the source of much of its appeal: it is an undisciplined concept.

It allows political philosophy, critical theory, gender studies and anthropology to speak to one another without reducing the analysis either to law, culture or political economy alone. A refugee, for instance, may be read as bare life in Agamben's sense, as a precarious life requiring recognition in Butler's sense, or as an agent negotiating survival at the margins of the state, in the sense suggested by Das and Poole. The category of the body impolitic can hold these levels together, as long as it is not allowed to replace the work of contextual analysis.

A second strength is that the concept addresses the visibility of the invisible. Naming bodies impolitic means refusing to treat marginal lives as accidental residues. If, as Das and Poole argue, margins are a necessary condition of the state, then those who inhabit them are not peripheral to political analysis. They reveal how power works. In this sense, the concept has critical force: it exposes the contradiction of political orders that proclaim universal rights while depending on the abandonment, debilitation or misrecognition of some lives.

A third advantage lies in the explicit reference to bodies. Unlike more abstract terms such as "subalterns" or "underclass", bodies impolitic brings analysis back to materiality: hunger, wounds, skin, fatigue, exposure, illness, debility. Butler's vulnerability and Puar's debilitation are useful precisely because they force us to confront the tangible effects of power: trauma, imposed disability, exhaustion, abandonment, or the slow subtraction of future. This makes the concept particularly relevant in contexts marked by migration, border regimes, health crises, urban marginality and institutional care.

The notion also opens comparative possibilities. It can connect the refugee camp, the migrant detention centre, the psychiatric clinic, the urban ghetto, the informal settlement and the militarised welfare programme, not by flattening their differences, but by asking how rights are suspended, bodies are classified, and marginal actors develop tactics of endurance, refusal or self-organisation. The essays in this issue make this potential visible. Marilungo's migrants across the Balkan Route, Antinori and Becatti's transgender migrant women in Rome, Ledderucci's young Mā'ohi enrolled in the RSMA, Buonvino's Amazigh performers, and Solimene's Roma families all inhabit spaces where incorporation and exclusion remain inseparable.

Finally, the concept carries a normative charge. To recognise bodies impolitic is to question citizenship, rights and community from the standpoint of those who are only partially admitted into them. In this sense, the concept may help imagine forms of politics not grounded on immunity, selection or

sacrificial exclusion. Yet this potential remains fragile: it depends on whether the analysis can move beyond denunciation and attend to the specific practices through which marginal actors inhabit, negotiate or contest their condition.

The concept also presents serious risks. The first is vagueness. “Bodies impolitic” can refer to migrants, prisoners, psychiatric patients, racialised minorities, sex workers, homeless people, refugees, colonised subjects or disabled populations. Its breadth is useful, but it can also blur decisive differences. The body of a migrant dying in the desert, that of a transgender woman negotiating asylum and sex work, and that of a psychiatric patient resisting diagnosis are not analytically interchangeable. Without contextual discipline, the category may slide into moral generalisation.

This problem is intensified by the ambiguity of “impolitic”. The term may suggest what is apolitical, anti-political, deprived of politics, or placed outside recognised politics. This ambiguity was already present in Herzfeld’s formulation and must be handled carefully. Calling someone impolitic may imply passivity, when many marginal actors are politically active through refusal, evasion, silence, irony, bodily performance or tactical opacity. The question must therefore always be specified: impolitic for whom, according to which institution, and from which interpretive position?

This is particularly visible in the essays of the collection. In Marilungo’s account of the Balkan Route, illegalised migrants may be read as resisting both humanitarian and securitarian regimes by remaining outside formal systems of protection and control. Yet it is not always clear whether such practices amount to political refusal, tactical survival, or temporary adaptation while waiting for a possible route into Europe. A similar ambivalence emerges in Antinori and Becatti’s cases, where transgender migrant women such as Samara and Ophelia challenge imposed categories while also navigating the conditional inclusion offered by asylum, anti-trafficking and protection regimes. Their agency is real, but it is exercised within narrow and often coercive structures.

A second limitation is conceptual redundancy. “Body impolitic” overlaps with biopolitics, necropolitics, social death, civil death, surplus life, subalternity and marginality. Its distinctive contribution must therefore be demonstrated, not assumed. Its possible specificity lies in liminality: the body impolitic is neither simply excluded nor fully included, but suspended between abandonment and incorporation, visibility and illegibility, recognition and exploitation. Still, this distinction can easily disappear if the term is used as a fashionable synonym for marginality.

A third difficulty concerns the relation between critique and construction. The literature behind the concept is often stronger in diagnosis than in political imagination. If impoliticity is structural to the state, as Agamben and Das and Poole suggest in different ways, how can it be overcome? Through inclusion? Yet Puar shows that inclusion may itself function as a technique of hierarchy, as in homonationalism. Through refusal? But refusal may remain fragile, partial and reversible. Through revolution? That horizon is rarely specified. The concept therefore risks becoming a sombre label, a tool for denunciation rather than for analysis of possible transformation.

Ledderucci's essay on the RSMA makes this tension concrete. Young Mā'ohi are included through military discipline, bodily training and employability, but this inclusion also simplifies their cultural and political complexity. Small gestures of distance or everyday sabotage may be read as resistance, but also as minor adjustments within an accepted institutional framework. Buonvino's analysis of Amazigh performances raises a comparable issue: are these performances instruments of assertion, conformity, resistance or co-optation? The answer cannot be decided in advance by the concept.

A final risk concerns the very word "body." Despite its material promise, the term may produce another abstraction if the analyst treats bodies only as surfaces on which power writes itself. Ethnography is valuable here because it restores singularity: memories, desires, kinship ties, fears, humour, shame, exhaustion, hope. Without this attention, "bodies impolitic" may paradoxically dehumanise those it seeks to make visible. The concept is useful only if it remains empirically constrained, theoretically modest and attentive to the difference between an analytical category and the lives it tries to illuminate.

Towards a thought of the impolitic: bodies in excess, bodies on the threshold

Writing an afterword sometimes means attempting to gather the crumbs left in the margins of essays, where what remains unsaid continues to press. In the texts collected here, this pressure manifests itself in the body's surplus, in other words its excess relative to knowledge, to the norm, to the political project that seeks to define it. It is from this excess, i.e. this structural "out-of-place", that a recurring figure takes shape across the various contributions: the body impolitic, never thematised in a univocal way, yet persistently present.

As we have clarified, these bodies impolitic should not be regarded as "bodies without politics", but rather as subjectivities that interrogate politics at the

blind spot of its own conditions of possibility. They resist being represented in unambiguous forms, refuse to be protected, and elude complete discipline. They are bodies in transit, in refusal, in suspension; bodies that make marginality an epistemic stance and non-cooperation a mode of affirmation.

The idea that the margin is not an extreme periphery, but a generative site from which the norm draws its legitimacy, re-emerges forcefully in these essays. In the Rome depicted by Marco Solimene, for example, the universe of Roma camps – illegal, authorised, and then again evicted – functions as a performative apparatus of urban sovereignty. Within this machinery, Ornella, a young Roma woman confined to her own caravan under house arrest, resists state power through minimal acts of performative disobedience: she dresses elegantly, applies makeup, smokes ostentatiously in front of the police. She does not flee, but delays; she remains. Ornella is not the citizen who claims rights, but the figure who destabilises the very framework of governability, inhabiting it from within and sabotaging it with her body.

Likewise, in Sefrou, Morocco, the Berber bodies that are verticalised and choreographed in the festival dances analysed by Michela Buonvino become subjects of a postcolonial pedagogy of folkloric integration. Yet, in the interruptions of the dance circle, in the transitions from communal performance to tourist-facing display, an ambiguous threshold emerges, namely a performative margin that reveals how “Moroccan-ness” itself is the result of an aesthetically-managed construction. Here, the body impolitic is the folklorised body, one that never ceases to disrupt the national scene: reduced to a sign, and yet still intensive, still alive.

In Bosnia, Sara Marilungo accompanies migrant bodies as they traverse the European border. These are bodies simultaneously overexposed and rendered invisible. F., S., M., and K. – the migrants she meets – do not identify as “refugees”, do not request protection, do not claim legitimacy. Instead, they turn abduction into a technique: sleeping in forests, hiding from police and humanitarian actors, refusing reception centres. Not because they exist “outside” politics, but because they are bodies saturated with governance, seeking zones of non-representation. Their impoliticity lies in their renunciation of being interpreted, of entering into the machinery of recognition.

Their existence does not simply pose questions, it interrogates. Just as they are interrogated, with fierce lucidity, by the trans migrant subjectivities documented by Silvia Antinori and Giacomo Becatti. Samara, from Argentina, applies for a residence permit fifteen years after arriving. The reply: it is too

late; she should have applied earlier. Her answer: “There were no possibilities before. Now there are. And now we want everything”. It is a statement that dissolves all normative moralism around the “when” and “how” of inclusion. Samara – like Ophelia, Klara, Ysenia – does not seek a place within the discourse of salvation. She claims a subjectivity that is out of time, out of role, out of frame.

These women belong to an impolitic genealogy: they have lived and worked in Italy for decades, yet continue to be re-signified as an “emergency” or a “problem”. They are endriagic figures, that is, hybrid and irredeemable, as Sayak Valencia (2010) describes them: subjectivities that resist reduction either to victims or to redeemed subjects. They exist by displacement, by excess, by dis-vision.

In Claudia Ledderucci’s essay, the body impolitic is the young Mā’ohi transformed into a *marsouin* (marine) by the French military programme. His inclusion is total: uniform, songs, postures, hierarchies. Yet it is precisely in this excess of normalisation that a breakdown occurs. Some force a smile, others scuff their ceremonial shoes, still others feign sleep to avoid participation. These are fragments of non-cooperation, of “not-yet-trainability”, which disrupt the integration apparatus.

As in the Moroccan festivals, here performance is a site of contradiction: the aesthetisation of difference and its simultaneous erasure. Indigenous dance and warrior songs become devices of domestication. But in moments of hesitation, in the misaligned smile, in the protest over a Saturday not granted, a fissure opens. The body impolitic does not shout “no”, but oscillates, deviates, complicates.

Finally, in the remarkable research by Colombo and Malatto, the body impolitic is the one that eludes diagnosis. These are not cases of rare diseases, but symptoms that fail to speak the language of medical knowledge. The patient who does not cooperate, who remains silent, who evades detection is not a clinical anomaly, but a theoretical and rhetorical figure. The body impolitic here is what compels the clinic to revise its epistemological structure: no longer classification, but listening; no longer vision, but vibration.

These are not “missing subjectivities” or “new political subjectivities”. They are not exemplary figures to be imitated or celebrated. Rather, they are living critical devices. Their politicity does not lie in what they do, but in what they make visible about our ways of thinking about power, care, inclusion, and citizenship.

Conclusion

Focusing on liminal subjectivities entails adopting a particular gaze, one that looks at politics from the margins, where categories blur and contradictions become visible.

The papers discussed in this postface give empirical and analytical density to this conceptual field. They show that the body impolitic is not a merely abstract figure, but a condition produced through concrete procedures: border regimes, medical classifications, bureaucratic categories, racialised suspicion, gendered exposure, humanitarian selection, urban marginality and the unequal distribution of public visibility. Taken together, these contributions suggest that exclusion rarely operates only by expelling bodies from the political order. More often, it works by including them in partial, conditional or degraded forms: as bodies to be managed, assisted, monitored, pitied, corrected, rescued, contained or translated into administratively acceptable terms. Their common theoretical contribution is therefore to shift attention from exclusion as simple absence to exclusion as a mode of problematic inclusion.

A quick synthesis of these papers allows us to extract at least four theoretical operations. First, they reveal how political belonging is embodied: rights, vulnerability, recognition and disposability are not assigned to abstract subjects, but to bodies marked by gender, race, illness, disability, poverty, mobility or legal status. Second, they show that liminality is not an accidental residue of political systems, but one of their ordinary modes of operation. The margin is not outside the state or outside politics; it is one of the places where the state and politics become most legible. Third, they invite us to analyse the ambiguity of care. Humanitarian, medical, welfare or security interventions may protect vulnerable subjects, but they may also fix them in subordinate positions, making recognition dependent on suffering, docility or administrative intelligibility. Fourth, they insist on the epistemic dimension of the body impolitic: these bodies do not merely suffer power, they also expose the categories through which power understands itself.

The strength of the category “bodies impolitic” lies in its capacity to bring these contributions into dialogue in order to make sense of complex and pressing phenomena, from migration to states of exception, from racial violence to the inequalities produced by globalisation. Its limitations lie in the potential for vagueness or one-dimensionality if not applied rigorously and dialogically. The category becomes analytically weak if it turns every marginal subject into the same figure of exclusion, or if it treats vulnerability as a moral

essence rather than as a historically produced relation. It is therefore essential not to lose sight of the concrete voices, practices and experiences of these bodies. The temptation to speak for them must give way to a commitment to listening, contextualisation and ethical representation.

Ultimately, “body impolitic” is a category with the potential to open new spaces for critical reflection and interdisciplinary research. It may inspire not only academic inquiry but also political and epistemic practices: from how migrants’ testimonies are collected, to forms of urban solidarity with the excluded, to the reformulation of legal categories aimed at including those currently deprived of them. Consider, for example, the debates on universal citizenship or unconditional basic income, that is, proposals that seek to extend recognition to precarious lives without forcing them first to pass through tests of deservingness, productivity or victimhood. In a world that oscillates between impulses of sovereign closure and appeals to the universality of rights, the concept of the body impolitic calls on us to keep our attention fixed on that oscillation, without allowing the grey zone to swallow up human dignity. In this sense, it can serve as a valuable critical compass for navigating “between margins and politics”, becoming a spur to imagine and build societies in which no one is forced to live impolitically, silently on the edge of the shared world.

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