In Search of Vitality. Herman Bang’s *Hopeless Generations* in the Context of Contemporary Bio-political Movements

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Abstract This article draws attention to the paradigmatic shift in the use of the concept of ‘life’, which can be observed at the end of the nineteenth century. With Michel Foucault’s notion of bio-power as a foil, the article aims firstly to discuss how influential aesthetic, biological and political concepts such as vitalism (Hans Driesch) and degeneration (Max Nordau) can be conceived as different reactions to Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* in the light of bio-power. Even though both Driesch and Nordau use Darwin’s theories to produce positive ideas about respectively the strong and healthy body and the strong and healthy society, it is important to note that they do not converge. Secondly, the article aims to discuss how a controversy between these concepts is given literary form in the Danish author Herman Bang’s novel *Hopeless Generations* (1880), perceived as one of the first ‘decadent’ works in Scandinavia. The reading demonstrates that Bang makes use of a rhetorical strategy of ambivalence in order to bring the concepts into productive play.

Keywords Vitalism · Decadence · The Reception of Darwin · Herman Bang · Bio-politics · ‘Hopeless Generations’

In the concluding chapter of *The Will to Knowledge*, Michel Foucault brings to the fore what he refers to as society’s “biological threshold of modernity”: a threshold that marks the time when life and the living being become the subject of political power struggles and economical strategies. ‘For millennia, man remained what he...
was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question’ (Foucault 1998, 143). He is submitted to bio-power.

In the modern ‘society of discipline’ and the late-modern ‘society of control’,¹ this bio-power has expressed itself in two general ways. Firstly, in the regimenting of the life via the development of a number of societal institutions that the individual passes through in his life-time, and that submit him to conforming behavioural patterns: the family, the school, the barracks, the workshop, the hospital, and possibly even the prison. The ideal project of these enclosed environments is especially visible in the factory, namely to put together a productive force, the effect of which will be bigger than the sum of the forces it is constituted by. Secondly, the bio-power expresses itself in the regulation of the people through an integration of economy (understood as the governing of the home) and politics (understood as the governing of polis). This new political economy that aims to transfer the patriarch’s solicitous governing of the family to state level, focuses not only on the relationship between capital and work, but also on the conditions of life themselves. The general state of health and the life expectancy of the people, its nutrition, housing and so on, become subject to demographic studies.

According to Foucault, the development of bio-power runs parallel to the development of industrial society—as a means of securing the productive apparatus a stable flow of work force. Thus, bio-power expresses itself with great strength in the second half of the nineteenth century. For example, it is expressed in the readiness with which notions developed within biology were appropriated by other discourses, such as the aesthetic. This article aims firstly to discuss how influential aesthetic concepts such as vitalism, decadence and degeneration can be conceived as different reactions to bio-power, and secondly, to show how a controversy between these concepts is given literary form in the Danish author Herman Bang’s novel Hopeless Generations (1880). As a starting point, we discuss the work that, more than any other, inspired this appropriation, Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species.

The Paradigmatic Turn in Biology: Darwin’s On the Origin of Species

The influence of On the Origin of the Species has been far greater than could have been imagined. Not only did Darwin challenge the Christian conception of life and creation, he also caused a paradigmatic shift in biology, which until then had searched for a force of life. What distinguished the Darwinian approach was a focus on the evolution of the species, and his thesis thereby supported the mechanistic paradigm which, since Descartes’ clear separation of body and mind, had argued in favour of life as a result of physical and chemical processes.

The aims of the Origin were to identify the mechanism of ‘natural selection’ and to trace back all creatures back to a few, perhaps even a single, progenitor (Darwin

¹ These epochal indications derive from Gilles Deleuze’s updating of Foucault’s concept of bio-power in the article ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’ (1992). According to Deleuze, Foucault locates the disciplinary societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; at the start of the twentieth century, they were succeeded by the societies of control.