

Bio-Economic-Politics, or, the Logic of Revolutionary Sovereignty

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This paper reevaluates the terms of Giorgio Agamben's argument for the secularization of *oikonomia* in late 18th-century Europe by examining the context of debates in Britain regarding the principles disseminated by the French Revolution. More specifically, it examines how the category of "economy" served as a trope for mediating between biology and politics, whose mutual articulation played an important role in shaping modern biopolitics.

John Thelwall, the late 18th-century English essayist, poet, and notorious political radical, serves as the paper's focus, since his informal medical training prompted him to elaborate a new version of vitalism with far-reaching implications for his aim to revolutionize British politics. Thelwall thoroughly explored those connections in his *The Peripatetic: Or, Sketches of the Heart, of Nature, and Society in a Series of Politico-Sentimental Journals* (1793), which prompted his trial for treason in 1794 and which was a sprawlingly hybrid text—part fiction, part poetry, part scientific treatise, and part sociopolitical diatribe. Thelwall endorses the notion of "system" as the form of "economy" able to conjoin the biological, financial, and political spheres, but rather than completely affirm the emergent perspective of political economy as described by Adam Smith—Agamben's chief example of this development—Thelwall insists on the need to distrust what he called "the clenched hand" of the socio-economic elite. Thus by contrast with Agamben's description of late 18th-century "economy" as a self-coherent, providential order, the system Thelwall outlines is a mutable sequence in which temporary systemic organization remains persistently open to further challenge or emendation—a logic that is captured particularly by *The Peripatetic's* succession of diverse genres. In the end, this formulation also has profound implications for Thelwall's portrayal of sovereignty, which becomes dependent on a heterogeneous distribution of authority across a spectrum of both biological and human registers.