

## **A Genealogy of Biopolitics: The Notion of Life in Canguilhem and Foucault**

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### *Biopolitics: A Polemical Concept*

In 1976, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault introduces what would become a polemical concept in his work as well as for his interpreters: the “bio-politics of the population” (with a hyphen which is dropped in the following years). This notion has since polarized the readings of Foucault’s theory of power and maybe has played a much more important role than he ever intended. The most prominent and popular reading of biopolitics nowadays may very well be its “ethical” interpretation in terms of bio-ethics. Biopolitics would thus be the “political” administration of the changes and new possibilities of the life sciences, predominantly of biology and genetics.<sup>1</sup> This reading recovers another line of interpretation that, even though it considers biopower not in terms of governance but in politico-philosophical terms, gives way to a twofold misreading: either the analysis of biopower is structurally linked to an analysis

of the regime of politics as a permanent state of exception, or it is subtended with a “positive” politics of life that thwarts the “negative” power over life. Roberto Esposito calls this polarity of the notion of biopolitics an “insurmountable oscillation” between a positive and productive reading of the relation between politics and life and another negative and tragic reading implied by Foucault’s writing itself. While the latter interpretation awards life with an intrinsic power that resists biopower, such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt propose, the former, proposed by Giorgio Agamben, radicalizes the thanato-political aspect in the notion of “bare life.”<sup>2</sup>

These varied interpretations of the notion of biopolitics are induced by an attempt to define the notion of life rather than the term “politics” or “power:” they give a “definition” of life (as biological life, as bare life, or as vital power) that Foucault himself, and for coherent reasons, has always omitted to give. This omission seems to have encouraged the ethical, productive, or tragic readings of Foucault’s biopolitics. In order to propose a genealogical study of the term “biopolitics,” it is thus important to take a closer look at the notion of life that may have inspired the Foucaultian analysis, and that does not correspond, as I would like to show in the following, to any of the three alternatives mentioned above.

### *The Birth of Biopolitics*

As already mentioned, Foucault gives a somewhat “canonic” definition of biopolitics in *The Will to Knowledge* where he introduces “biopolitics” as *one side* or pole of a twofold power *over* life that he distinguishes from the right of death incarnated by sovereign power. The two principal forms, in which the power over life has developed, are not antithetical, but rather constitute the two poles of the changes that power undergoes around the seventeenth century and whose main role is “to ensure, sustain, and multiply life” (*WK*, 138). The first pole is constituted by the disciplines, “an anatomo-politics of the human body,” that is, centered on “the body as a machine” (*WK*, 139) and to which Foucault has dedicated one of his main works, *Discipline and Punish* (1975) as well as his lecture series *Abnormal* at the Collège de France in 1974–75.<sup>3</sup> The second pole of the power over

life—biopolitics—develops around the middle of the eighteenth century: it is a form of power centered on the “species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes” (*WK*, 139). This species body is governed (or “supervised”) through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls that Foucault calls “a biopolitics of the population” (*WK*, 139). And he concludes this first introduction of the notion of biopolitics as follows: “The setting up, in the course of the classical age, of this great bipolar technology—anatomic and biological, individualizing and specifying, directed toward the performances of the body, with attention to the process of life—characterized a power whose highest function was perhaps no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through” (*WK*, 139).

To resume, on the one hand, Foucault defines biopolitics through its reference to life *as its object* as opposed to the sovereign power whose object is the juridical subject, and to the disciplinary power, whose techniques are directed toward the individual. On the other hand, the specificity of the biopolitical techniques lies in the *positive* and not repressive relation to life and in the fact that such techniques are *intrinsic* and not exterior to its object. Biopolitical techniques increase, protect, and regulate life—in short, they “make live.” And they do so by infiltrating the processes of life (instead of suppressing or submitting them) in order to govern or to rule them from the inside.

It is important to keep this twofold definition in mind, since it permits one to counteract the reduction of biopolitics to a simple politics *whose object is life* that has given way to the generalization of the notion in its (bio-)ethical version. While in the first occurrence in *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault’s focus lies with the fact that post-sovereign power is defined through a new object, the life of the population, in his lectures of the following years, namely *Security, Territory, Population* (1977–78) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978–79), Foucault emphasizes the positive nature of the relationship between power and life. He therefore reformulates and amplifies the notion of biopower, referring to it by the name of governmentality. The introduction of this new name of power might be a reaction to a slightly too “narrow” notion of biopolitics that focuses mostly on the relation to its “new” object (life) and leaves aside the positivity of this relation. In any case, it allows him to refocus the analysis on the productivity of

power that relies, as I would like to show, on the imitation of the vital dynamics of life. It is in the analysis of governmentality that the implications of biopolitics, as a positive and productive power over life, are completely unfolded.

### *Archeology of Life*

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the sense of a “positive” relationship between power and life. Therefore, it is necessary to take a new look at the notion of life that is implicated in the term of “biopolitics” such as Foucault uses it. Foucault operates with a notion of life that he does not determine: life is a correlate of the techniques and strategies of power and knowledge. It lacks any ontological status and is itself “produced” by the power-knowledge constellation, or, to use the famous formula of *The Order of Things*, life *emerges* in the passage between natural history and biology, that is, in the epistemic break which occurs around 1800. This episteme emerges because of an archeological dislocation that introduces the notion of “organization” as fundamental to the study of the living and replaces the “tableau” of natural history by the constitutive opposition between the organic (the living) and the inorganic. This archeological dislocation permits to think of life as fundamentally dynamic: life is the polarity or tension between the two poles of the organic and the inorganic. It is here, Foucault explains, that a definition of life through death, that is, as “resistance to death”—such as the French anatomist and physiologist Xavier Bichat has proposed—becomes thinkable.<sup>4</sup> Life—one could say paraphrasing and transposing Canguilhem’s definition of the normal—is a dynamic and thus a polemical notion,<sup>5</sup> since it is formed in the tension between these different poles; it is a polar movement between tendencies of self-preservation and tendencies of self-transgression.

Nevertheless it is crucial to understand that Foucault, unlike Bichat or Canguilhem, does not seek to analyze the vital dynamic in itself (i.e., at defining life as vital power); rather, Foucault analyzes the *epistemic fact* that life becomes *thinkable* as dynamic, vital, or living. It is this understanding of “life” (along with “labor” and “language”) as a “quasi-transcendental,”<sup>6</sup> that is, the archeology of life that explains the indetermination of life in

Foucault's thought. This indetermination is thus not a lack or an omission in his thought, as Giorgio Agamben suggests, by making his own interpretation of life in terms of bare life come to fill this lack and complete the Foucaultian theory of power. On the contrary, this indetermination is a methodological point and ought to be taken seriously inasmuch as the sharpness of Foucault's reflections on biopolitics is due to the very indetermination understood as "normalizability" of life by power-knowledge strategies. Foucault's lack of a definition of life is neither an oversight nor an inexactness, but an intentional indetermination that is opposed, on the one hand, to an interpretation of life as force that would situate it beyond the power mechanisms, and, on the other hand, to an ontological reformulation of that same indetermination that considers life in its radical bareness.

The fact that Foucault himself gives no definition of "his" concept of life has been widely discussed, for instance by Agamben in his comparative analysis of the notion of life in the thought of Foucault and Deleuze titled "Absolute Immanence." Here, Agamben states that "a clear definition of 'life' seems to be lacking in both Foucault and Deleuze."<sup>7</sup> Even though his text centers on a reading of Deleuze's notion of life, he begins with a short reading of Foucault's "Life: Experience and Science," a reprinting of the English introduction to the translation of Canguilhem's *On the Normal and the Pathological*. Agamben sees in this text "a curious inversion of what had been Foucault's earlier understanding of the idea of life," when in *The Birth of the Clinic* he understood life, following Bichat's new vitalism, as "the set of functions that resist death."<sup>8</sup> Now, in his last text, he considers life, following Canguilhem, as the "proper domain of error." For Agamben, this "displacement" would be a further documentation of the crisis Foucault allegedly went through after the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. But there is more to it, as Agamben follows up: "It is something like a new experience that necessitates a general reformulation of the relations between truth and the subject and that, nevertheless, concerns the specific area of Foucault's research. Tearing the subject from the terrain of the cogito and consciousness, this experience roots it in life."<sup>9</sup> A life that is essentially errancy. For Agamben, who follows Deleuze in this respect, this "dislocation of the theory of knowledge," that is, the connection of subjectivity to life (and not to consciousness), announces the "subjective turn" of

the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* and “coincides with the field of biopolitics, that could have furnished Foucault with the ‘third axis, distinct from both knowledge and power’ which Deleuze suggests he needed.”<sup>10</sup>

Agamben thus raises two fundamental hypotheses: first, he claims that Foucault, at the end of his life, turned away from the “negative” notion of a life radically exposed to death toward a subjectivity understood from the position of a fundamentally dynamic notion of life. Second, he links the notion of life defined through death to the biopolitical paradigm, that is, to bare life, a life always already subjected to power, that constitutes the reference point of the biopolitical techniques. Whereas Agamben does not give any further comments on the question of a “subjectivity,” which he calls a “form of life” that resists (bio)power, he extensively writes on the notion of *bare life* (*zoe*) that he considers to be the object of biopolitics.

### *Life as Biopolitical Substance*

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Agamben proposes his interpretation of the Foucaultian notion of biopolitics that relies on a structural identity between the biopolitical and the sovereign form of power. In the introduction, Agamben announces that his inquiry concerns precisely “this hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power.”<sup>11</sup> The inclusion of bare life in the realm of the political constitutes the “original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power,” whose “*original activity* . . . is the production of a biopolitical body.”<sup>12</sup> The “biological life” that the modern state places at the center of his attention is therefore structurally the same life exposed to the sovereign right over life and death, and biopolitics and sovereign power therefore have the same origin.

The bare life produced by the sovereign states of exception is furthermore identified by Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* as the “absolute biopolitical substance.”<sup>13</sup> The affirmation of a necessary relationship between biopolitics and sovereign power culminates in the provocative and well-known conclusion that “today it is not the city [*polis*] but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of

the West.”<sup>14</sup> In the camp, populated by the *homines sacri*, who can be killed but not be sacrificed, the sovereign exception that has become the rule is unified with the biopolitical paradigm through the production of bare life. The biopolitical body produced by the sovereign power is identified with this bare life, *zoe*, that according to Aristotle is distinguished from qualified life, *bios*. Bare life, in Agamben’s understanding, would then be the transcendental origin of modern politics and there would not be any structural difference (even though there are historical differences) between the functioning of sovereign power and the biopolitical techniques. Bare life is the negation of any qualification, and therefore it is a transhistorical notion, an ontological category. Instead of tracing the discontinuities in the succession of the forms of power and knowledge, Agamben pretends to reveal the hidden or invisible elements that determine *every* form of power latently.<sup>15</sup>

The fact that life is always exposed to power is also a basic statement in Foucault. Foucault also does not deny that there is an interaction between sovereign techniques of exception and the biopolitical techniques. In his lecture on March 17, 1976, at the Collège de France, Foucault gives the example of racism that permits to “justify” the killing of people, populations, and civilizations within modern societies that function in the bio-power mode: “If the power of normalization wished to exercise the old sovereign right to kill, it must become racist” (*SMD*, 256). But for Foucault, this constellation is open to changes and can be situated historically, it is not a structural necessity, not the very “essence” of modern power. Agamben’s intentional misreading of Foucault’s notion of biopolitics becomes visible in his claim that Foucault was not aware of the *fundamental* nexus between biopolitics and sovereign power and that his “death kept him from showing how he would have developed the concept and study of biopolitics.”<sup>16</sup> This may seem surprising since Foucault dedicated the lectures that followed the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* to the techniques and *dispositifs* of security (in *Security, Territory, Population*) and to *The Birth of Biopolitics*, where he developed the implications of the notion of biopolitics toward a theory of governmentality. Instead of approaching biopolitics from the notion of sovereign power, he examines the distance and differences between these two modalities of power. This distance crystallizes in an archeological understanding of life as a correlate to specific techniques of power and knowledge.

*Polarity of Life*

The articulation of power that governs the living thus supposes a knowledge of the living. In the epistemic conjuncture in which biopolitics emerges, this knowledge is articulated by medicine and biology at the beginning of the nineteenth century, both of which are related to a specific vitalist thought. Life is defined through its fundamental variability, through its possibility of deviation and error. And it is in this deviation or erring that life appears as fundamentally *living*, as bearing a vital dynamics. What is at play here is thus a *dynamic* notion of life that nevertheless is not subsumable under a mere teleology of the organic as Kant suggests in the modus of the “as if,” nor a specific vitalist conception of the dynamics of life as an unitarian principle. At stake is the understanding of life as fundamentally dynamic *and* erratic, life as polarized between different dynamics of the living—the self-preservation of the organic and the self-creation of the vital that goes beyond the mere preservation of an organic equilibrium. The movement of self-creation is not to be disconnected from the self-preservative movement: life, as it becomes thematized around 1800, is neither pure transgression nor pure self-preservation, but defines itself in the tension between these two.

In his *Physiological Researches upon Life and Death* published originally in 1800, Bichat formulates a fundamental difference between the sciences of the living and the natural sciences. While the laws of nature are “unchangeable, invariable and constantly the same in any moment,”<sup>17</sup> the organic or vital laws are variable, irregular and unstable, since their object—life—is constantly submitted to variations, errors, deviations, and anomalies. In his *General Anatomy*, Bichat distinguishes:

two things in the phenomena of life: firstly, the state of health; secondly, the state of illness; physiology is in charge of the phenomena of the first state, pathology has as its object the second state. The history of those phenomena in which the vital forces exhibit their natural type leads us to the history of those phenomena in which these forces are altered.<sup>18</sup>

Canguilhem reformulates this opposition in his major work *On the Normal and the Pathological* as a “fundamental epistemic fact.”<sup>19</sup> While there can be (and there is) a biological pathology, a physical, chemical, or me-



chanical pathology cannot exist, because the physical forces cannot be altered in any way. While the physical phenomena are indifferent to their surroundings, there cannot be, as Canguilhem puts it, any “biological indifference”:

We, on the other hand, think that the fact that a living man reacts to a lesion, infection, functional anarchy by means of a disease, expresses the fundamental fact that life is not indifferent to the conditions in which it is possible, that life is polarity and thereby even an unconscious position of value; in short, life is in fact a normative activity. . . . Normative, in the fullest sense of the word, is that which establishes norms. And it is in this sense that we plan to talk about biological normativity.<sup>20</sup>

For Canguilhem, Bichat’s major merit consists in having acknowledged the productivity of the irregularities, of the fallibilities of life, in short, of the “negative dimension”—the negative vital values such as anomaly, illness, death—for the living.<sup>21</sup> He speaks in this context of the “intelligence of anomaly” that retrieves the signs of a vital force (*pouvoir de vivre*) by turning these negative values of existence into “meaningful” elements that deploy the vital dynamics of life.<sup>22</sup> Canguilhem thus adopts at once from Bichat the epistemological thesis that the knowledge of life is based on the analysis of the morbid phenomena—life is only acknowledgeable through its errors, which refer every living being to its constitutive imperfection and incompleteness, and the determination of life as a dynamic that tends to a “natural type,” to a norm.

The value of life, that is, life *as value*, life in its *inner normativity*, is thus founded on its own uncertainty or precariousness (*précarité*).<sup>23</sup> The normative dynamics of life unfold between the two poles: the preservation of the internal organic equilibrium (of the *milieu intérieur* in Claude Bernard’s words), and the permanent challenge to this very equilibrium. Canguilhem thus differentiates two normative dimensions of life that stand in an intrinsic relationship to each other: a homeostatic, self-preservative dynamic that tends to organic normality, and a self-transgressive, genuinely normative dynamic that *creates* norms. While the former presupposes a holistic understanding of the organism and is thought by means of the global activity of regulation as the biological fact par excellence, the latter transgresses this organic equilibrium and creates new vital values. The achieved norms, or the

normal situation, are constantly put at risk, because otherwise the living would immobilize itself in the artificial equilibrium of organ functions.

Vital normativity, for Canguilhem, is not assimilation or adaptation, but permanent challenge to the given. A living being behaves normatively if it does not adapt to a given milieu or norm—in that case, it would be pathological—but when it creates its own norms and its own milieu. Life is a twofold normative activity that, on the one hand, refers negatively or reactively to the threats of the internal and external milieu and its negative values, and, on the other, is a positive and creative activity that produces its own milieu and its vital norms. Only in its deviance from the norm can life be normative, that is, truly vital. Normativity consists in “breaking norms and establishing new ones [*faire craquer les normes*].”<sup>24</sup> An internal equilibrium is only possible on the background of such a creative force: normality is founded on normativity. The challenge of Canguilhem’s notion of life lies in the fact that the organic normality is permanently exposed to the normative deviances, that is, that life does *not* stay in a state of equilibrium (such as, for example, the state produced in the laboratory artificially), but that it puts this state of equilibrium permanently in question in order to transgress it. If life is “only” organic, it would be pathological; instead it is a polarity and therefore organic and creative at once, that is, it is living in the emphatic sense of the word.<sup>25</sup> It is this notion of life in its active–reactive polarity that is illuminating in order to understand the specific *modus operandi* of the post-sovereign techniques of power that enfold both the biopolitical and the governmental techniques.

### *Biopolitics as Life*

Against this background, the main hypothesis of this article is that in order to govern life, the forms of biopower *imitate* or *mimetize* the proper dynamics of life, that is, its polarity between life and death, or between auto-transgression and auto-conservation, between the normal (one should read normative) and the pathological. Life has thus to be understood in a double sense, as the *object* of post-sovereign techniques of power, and, in its dynamical dimension, as their *operational model*. Imitation has to be understood following the Aristotelian understanding of *mimesis* not as a simple copy (art as a copy of nature) but as the reproduction of the sense of a

specific phenomenon or production. Hence the biopolitical–governmental techniques adopt the internal logic of life as the model of their proper dynamics and establish *a relation of internal exteriority* with the vital phenomena. The norms of biopower operate *as if* they were vital, that is, they adopt the vital functioning of the processes of life as their model and exteriorize them in the social norms. This hypothesis can be accounted for through two main notions that Foucault introduces in his biopolitical analysis: the “population” and the “milieu” that both have a specific constitution since they both operate at the intersection between the natural and the artificial, the organic (living) and the inorganic (physical), the vital and the social elements. It is in the production of a population and of a milieu as natural–artificial phenomena that life becomes governable.

For Foucault, biopolitics is a modality of power that in a precise historical moment overdetermines the other modalities of power. Therefore he proposes a *genealogy* of power that does not aspire at unveiling trans-historical or structural elements or at discovering the original and foundational scene of power in general, but at analyzing concrete constellations of power–knowledge as conditions of possibility of the constitution and imposition of specific forms of governmentality. Instead of speaking of power or politics of life, or of power over life, Foucault speaks of the “government of the living” in his lectures of the late 1970s, in order to highlight the insoluble relationship between power and life that however does not lead to the dissolution of life or of power, but to its necessary intrication. In this sense, even the formulation “power over life” that Foucault introduces in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* may appear ambiguous since it supposes an exteriority between the processes of life and power. It is not until the lectures on governmentality that this ambiguity will be completely resolved in what I have been calling the amplified notion of biopolitics; that is, in a form of power that is always internally linked to life both as its object and its functional model: a government of life.

Adopting this amplified understanding of biopolitics, Foucault avoids what he calls in the lecture of March 7, 1979, a “reduction” of the different forms of power:

For example, an analysis of social security and the administrative apparatus on which it rests ends up, via some slippages and thanks to some plays on words,

referring us to the analysis of concentration camps. And, in the move from the social security to concentration camps the requisite specificity of the analysis is diluted. (BB, 187)

In order to avoid this dissolution of the specificity of the analysis and the dilution of the differences that exist between the mechanisms of the welfare state and the concentration camps in a transhistorical and blurred notion of power, it is necessary to analyze the concrete phenomena that correspond to the different modalities of power.

When taking seriously the central hypothesis of the present text—that a reformulated and amplified notion of biopolitics is one whose techniques refer to life in two ways, taking it not only as its object, but also as its functional model<sup>26</sup>—we can state that the biopolitical norms not only *apply* to the phenomena of life but moreover that they *mimetize* its dynamics, that is, its normativity such as Canguilhem presents it. This hypothesis is confirmed by Foucault's reformulation of the biopolitical techniques under the name of "security techniques" in his lectures on governmentality that follow the same scheme, that of biological normativity. With the aim of regulating, controlling, and governing life *better*, the security techniques adopt the immanent dynamic of life that they exteriorize by *transposing* it to the social norms. This mechanism can be observed in the examples that Foucault gives of the operating mode of the security norms that "anticipate" the aleatoric processes of life in order to prevent major deregulations. For example, the empirical techniques of the inoculation campaigns against the smallpox (*la petite vérole*) are based on two strategies that are fundamental for the biopolitical *modus operandi*: first, they part from the phenomenon in its very reality (through quantitative methods/statistics); and second, they incorporate or imitate the dynamic of their object of reference.

The first strategy the techniques of variolization borrow from the biopolitical operations is its relation to the empirical reality of the phenomenon in question, in this case the epidemic, more specifically smallpox. The techniques of variolization are developed in a relation of double dependency to the statistic investigations that, first, indicate what groups of population are at higher risk, and, second, retain the success of the inoculation campaign by reflecting them in the mortality rate. Foucault calls this operation

a process of *normalization* that he distinguishes in the lecture of January 25, 1978, from the disciplinary *normation*. Normation presupposes a purely prescriptive character of the norm that is at the base of the definition of the normal and the a(b)normal. The phenomena are submitted to the norm, they are *normed*. In contrast, normalization is a dynamic and variable process and its norm is “an interplay of differential normalities.” The process of normalization covers life in its very reality, that is, in its vital multiplicity as a self-regulating and self-creative entity whose immanent dynamic results from the permanent deviations from the “normal” situations. In this sense, Foucault writes, “the normal comes first and the norm is deduced from it, or the norm is fixed and plays its operational role on the basis of this study of normalities.” Or, as he adds in a note, “the operation of normalization consists in establishing an interplay between these different distributions of normality” (*STP*, 63).

The second strategy is the mimetization of the vital dynamics by the techniques of variolization. Since the efficiency of the security techniques is based on the very reality of the phenomenon, it is fundamental to take into account their dynamics. By doing so, the principle of the fight against smallpox through variolization is to assure the health of the population by producing the illness, and therefore by unchaining in the body its auto-immunization. Variolization, explains Foucault:

did not try to prevent smallpox so much as provoke it in inoculated individuals, but under conditions such that nullification of the disease could take place at the same time as this vaccination, which thus did not result in a total and complete disease. With the support of this kind of first small, artificially inoculated disease, one could prevent other possible attacks of smallpox. We have here a typical mechanism of security with the same morphology as that seen in the case of scarcity. (*STP*, 59)

With respect to the treatment of scarcity, Foucault explains even more clearly, that:

whereas the juridical-disciplinary regulations that reigned until the middle of the eighteenth century tried to prevent the phenomenon of scarcity, from the middle of the eighteenth century, with the physiocrats as well as many other economists, there was the attempt to find a point of support in the processes of scarcity themselves, in the kind of quantitative fluctuation that sometimes

produced abundance and sometimes scarcity: finding support in the reality of the phenomenon, and instead of trying to prevent it, making other elements of reality function in relation to it in such a way that the phenomenon is cancelled out, as it were. (*STP*, 59)

The techniques of the security *dispositif* thus correspond to an operational model that is not based on negation, but rather on grasping the dynamics of the vital phenomenon in its very reality that aims at reestablishing its internal equilibrium when it is threatened. Immunology as well as the physiocratic theory of scarcity are palpable examples of this mechanism that respond to the dynamics of a *laissez-faire*.

### *The Living Population and Its Milieu*

The generalization of this operational mode of power goes along, as Foucault explains still in his lecture, with the emergence of what he calls “an absolutely new political personage” (*STP*, 67), the population, that is considered “as a set of processes to be managed at the level and on the basis of what is natural in these processes” (*STP*, 70). This population is not, then, a collection of juridical subjects in an individual or collective relationship with a sovereign will. It is a set of elements in which we can note constants and regularities even in accidents, in which we can identify the universal of desire regularly producing the benefit of all, and with regard to which we can identify a number of modifiable variables on which it depends. Taking the effects specific to population into consideration, making them pertinent if you like, is, I think, a very important phenomenon: the entry of a “nature” into the field of techniques of power, of a nature that is not something on which, above which, or against which the sovereign must impose just laws (*STP*, 74).

The nature that enters the realm of power relations through the population does not address the notion of sovereignty but what will be a new technique of power, the “government,” which “is basically much more than sovereignty, much more than reigning or ruling” (*STP*, 76).

This new constellation of power, that refers to a “natural” object whose dynamics Foucault has spelled out in his lectures of the prior year, marks

the central point of intersection between the vital and the social fundamental for the understanding of the amplified notion of biopolitics that imitates the vital dynamics of life exteriorizing it into social norms of security. Here, Foucault claims that population is an ensemble of natural and social elements which are both exposed to and produced by power relations. In this sense, the task of biopolitics is to introduce mechanisms of regulation into the natural–social phenomenon that is global population:

Regulatory mechanisms must be established to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field. In a word, security mechanisms have to be installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings so as to optimize the state of life. . . . It is, in a word, a matter of taking control of life and the biological processes of man as species and of assuring that they are not disciplined, but regularized. (*SMD*, 246)

The *modus operandi* of the “new,” post-sovereign techniques of power is to frame the hazardous play, the vital dynamics, the aleatory of life in the general population. They do so without repression or negation of the phenomena themselves, by allowing for an apparent freedom, that nevertheless needs to remain within specific limits that even though they can be very wide, are not to be exceeded: the post-sovereign techniques of power *pathologize* life’s vital normativity in the way Canguilhem has defined it, by reducing it to normality.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, when the surplus of vital force creates a disorder in the forms of power, the vitality of life is to be dissolved in the internal (and quasi-natural) equilibrium (of the population), reducing the vital to the normal that therein becomes governable. Consequently, biopolitics and the forms of governmentality share a double relationship to the phenomena of life that they govern and whose dynamics they imitate and transpose to the norms of power that operate *as if they were vital*. The vital force is thus considered an organic element of biopolitics that,<sup>28</sup> by imitating the vital dynamics, imitates at once the polarized interplay between creation and conservation of the vital processes

The specific status of the population as natural–artificial hybrid is spelled out by Foucault through another central notion, the “milieu,” in

which the population becomes perfectly governable. The milieu is part of the biopolitical or governmental *dispositif* since it permits a non-direct—a disposing—access to the living. It is by intervening in the milieu that the population is regulated: “What one tries to reach through this milieu, is precisely the conjunction of a series of events produced by these individuals, populations, and groups, and quasi natural events which occur around them” (*STP*, 21). The living are not exposed directly to power mechanisms, but these get to the living through the milieu that is manipulated in order to secure the development of the population: post-sovereign power strategies create a milieu, in which the population can unfold its living dynamics, so that the means of self-conservation are held at the disposal of the living and life can regulate itself.

For Foucault, this milieu is paradigmatically represented by the “town,” where the “naturalness” of human species emerges within an artificial milieu. This connection between the natural and living and the political and artificial is fundamental to biopolitics and presents Foucault’s own “reformulation” or amplification of the mechanism of post-sovereign power techniques. It is not just a power that refers to life, but a power that creates a milieu where the interaction between the natural and the artificial follows the precepts of power itself. Through the milieu of the town, that is at once artificial and natural, the population can be reached, becomes permeable to power techniques. Referring to Moheau, whom he calls the first great theorist of biopolitics, and his *Recherches et considérations sur la population de la France*, Foucault explains that what has fundamentally changed in the relation to life and the naturalness of human species is its quality: “But what [before] then appeared above all in the form of need, insufficiency, or weakness, illness, now appears as the intersection between a multiplicity of living individuals working and coexisting with each other in a set of material elements that act on them and on which they act in turn” (*STP*, 22). Life is no longer perceived as fundamentally negative, insufficient, and needy, but as a positive dynamic that power mechanisms can adopt in order to govern the living more efficiently. It is not life itself that becomes the object of biopower, but the biological link of the living (the population) to the materiality within which it exists, that is, its hybrid constitution that oscillates between the biological, natural, living dimension and the permeability to an artificial, social, and material ma-



nipulation within the milieu, a manipulation through power that appears *as if* it was natural.

### *Power of Resistance*

To conclude, it is thus possible to affirm, from an epistemic perspective, that the techniques of biopolitics participate in the very movement of re-definition of the notion of life. They do not “confront” themselves to a life that exists beyond its historical constellations of power–knowledge, but they “invade” a life that is saturated with these very techniques and constellations, a correlative life, that consequently lacks an ontological status, a life that is undetermined and open to determinations and normalizations from the outside: a hybrid, natural–artificial life. Consequently it is not only the conditions of possibility of a *biology* that appear around 1800, but also the conditions of possibility of a *biopolitics*.

From a political perspective it is important to take a careful look at the twofold processes of life and their relation to biopolitics, since the “amplified” notion of biopolitics, governmentality, stands out from the sovereign or disciplinary techniques of power inasmuch as the security *dispositif* encloses both the self-preserving aspect of vital processes as well as the transgressive aspect and inscribes it incessantly in the biopolitical efforts of the constitution of a “good” population through the interaction with a milieu. The problem that arises with this amplified reading of the notion of biopolitics is the question of a possible “way out” of this positive and omnipresent form of power. One might think, after the analysis of vital normativity as a fundamental element of the post-sovereign strategies of power, that this is where a possible resistance to the forms of power lies, in a “form of life” that transcends its inscription into a power mechanism. But it is crucial to understand that the normativity of life, even taken as the model of the *modus operandi* of post-sovereign power, is not exterior to these strategies of power and thus cannot propose an “outside of power” as some of the recent interpretations of Foucault’s notion of biopolitics suggest.

Foucault himself does not treat explicitly the problem of resistance in relation to biopower beyond the unveiling of their quasi-organic entanglement. In the first part of *The History of Sexuality* he thus presents the

identification of a simple affirmation of sexuality to resistance against power as an illusion created by power itself. The so-called sexual revolution does not mean the liberation of a dominated subject but its major inscription into the sexual *dispositif*.<sup>29</sup>

We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality. It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point of the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex—desire, but bodies and pleasures. (*WK*, 157)

This somehow imprecise affirmation does not give many leads to understand what resistance to power might be, but it has given way to various “positive” readings of the “last” Foucault. These readings link the apparent rupture in the theory of power (between biopolitics and governmentality) to the third “theoretical shift”<sup>30</sup> that following Foucault had become necessary in order to analyze “what is termed ‘the subject’” (*UP*, 6).

Instead of following this path that links the subjective turn to a reformulation of the theory of power (that allegedly has ended in a “dilemma”) and the possibility of a space beyond power that seems not fully coherent with Foucault’s thinking,<sup>31</sup> I would like to focus on an alternative way of approaching the phenomena of resistance by taking a brief look at what Foucault himself introduces under the term of “counter-conducts” or “counter-discourses.” In his reading of Foucault’s work, Deleuze describes the question of resistance within biopower as follows:

When power becomes bio-power, resistance becomes the power of life, a vital power that cannot be confined within a species, environment or the paths of a particular diagram. Is not the force that comes from outside a certain idea of life, a certain vitalism in which Foucault’s thought culminates?<sup>32</sup>

Deleuze explicitly affirms the existence of a vital force that is fundamentally resistant and escapes the biopolitical techniques: “a force that comes from the outside.” He thus realizes two operations that according to my understanding of biopolitics would be inadmissible: he identifies life as

the ontological support for a resisting force, and he localizes this resistance in an “outside” of power. By doing so, he misses two crucial points in the Foucaultian analytics of power. Deleuze is unable to think the dynamics of power as the (social) imitation or reenactment of the vital dynamics (since this operation would put the vital resistance in a dangerous proximity to power). But he also misses the ubiquity of post-sovereign power which is one of its main features and does not represent a “dilemma.”

Nevertheless the vital force, or the specific vitalism, that Deleuze understands as the third axis needed by Foucault in the crisis after the publication of *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, as Agamben has recalled, might seem homogeneous to the vital dynamics Canguilhem introduces. However, life as understood by Canguilhem is a normative concept, defined in the polarity between two tendencies, self-regulation and self-transgression. Life is the normative tension between these two poles and it is fundamentally related to vital negative values such as anomaly, illness, and death. For Canguilhem, there is no self-regulation without self-transgression and vice-versa. The homeostasis of the organism is produced through the deviations of the organism, deviations that are not reducible to their organic function, but that permanently transgress the cycle of equilibrium of the organism in order to be fully vital, that is, normative. The notion of life is fundamentally determined by this polarity. The power *over* life refers to life insofar as it is polar, that is, it encompasses both, the organic and the vital, dimensions of life. Therefore the force of life is not an alternative to power, but rather a structural moment (an organic element) of power. Thus, for Foucault, the tactical production of deviation is to be understood as a step further toward the inscription of life in the paradigm of post-sovereign power. In fact this form of power adopts the features of an immunitarian democracy, that is, the features of a form of power that tends to immunize life in its totality, so that the production of differences (under the global motto of multiculturalism) may be considered nothing else than the last spin of this same power.<sup>33</sup>

Precisely the *modus operandi* of biopower that imitates the dynamics of life makes this affirmation more transparent. The governmental operation of biopower consists in reducing the normative potential of life to its normal equilibrium from the moment on when this dynamic–normative

potential tends to transgress the admissible limits for the good operation of government, or, to follow up on the biological metaphor, when the creative force of life and its tendency to self-transgression tends to exceed the self-regulating and self-conservative (homeostatic) tendencies of life. Biopolitics in this amplified sense is characterized by confronting this twofold dynamics. Consequently it is impossible to speak of a power *of* life that imposes on or exceeds the power *over* life. Biopolitics admits the free play of creative tendencies of life as long as they can be integrated in the global equilibrium of the population. If they exceed the limits of integration and threat to become *ungovernable*, their normativity ought to be reduced to their normality, because *society must be defended*.

As regarding the second point of Deleuze's analysis, it is useful to take seriously Foucault's affirmation that there is no outside to power. More than in his books, it is in his "minor" writings where Deleuze once called the other side of Foucault's thought, where lines of actualization can be traced, that Foucault adopts what he himself would later call a "critical posture." In an interview that Jacques Rancière held with Foucault for the newly founded magazine *Les Révoltes Logiques* in 1977, a year after the publication of *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, he puts it as follows:

There are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies.<sup>34</sup>

The question of resistance cannot be asked outside the analytics of power; and resistance ought to be formulated as "counter-conducts" or "counter-discourses." There is no exteriority to power in the Foucaultian theory of power, and resistance is intrinsically linked to the very dynamics of power and thus initiates the interminable spiral of power and counter-power. Resistance to power does not derive from a theory of social exclusion, but it is itself a "theory" in the Foucaultian sense: a "non-totalizing, local and regional practice," a "prise de parole" of those exposed to power relations. These "words [*paroles*]" understood as counter-discourses and counter-conducts can desta-

bilize the sensible conditions of visibility and sayability, or rather the determination and restriction of these conditions, that is, the partition of the sensible, to speak with Rancière. And they will thus reenact a stage of the political where the supposed naturalness of the constellations of power and knowledge are exposed and possibly deconstructed.

34. For an extended version of my argument see Lemke, “Critique and Experience in Foucault.”

35. Foucault points to the motto of Enlightenment according to Kant: *Aude sapere*, which means “dare to know” or “have the courage, the audacity, to know” (see WE, 306). See also Foucault’s lectures on “fearless speech” where he insists that the ancient activity of the truth-teller (the parrhesiast) is connected to risk-taking: “Parrhesia, then, is linked to courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger” (Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 18). This is—according to Foucault—intimately linked to “the roots of what we could call the ‘critical’ tradition in the West” (ibid., 170).

36. Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” 114. Cf. also SP, 332.

37. Butler, “What Is Critique?” See also Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik*.

38. Esposito, *Communitas*.

39. Esposito, *Immunitas*. See also Esposito, *Bios*; Celikates, “Communitas–Immunitas–Bíos.”

40. Foucault, “The Moral and Social Experience of the Poles,” 465.

41. Castel, “From Dangerousness to Risk,” 289.

#### 4. A GENEALOGY OF BIOPOLITICS: THE NOTION OF LIFE IN CANGUILHEM AND FOUCAULT MARIA MUHLE

1. For this reading of the notion of “biopolitics” see Geyer, *Biopolitik*; for the critique of a liberal eugenics see Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur*.

2. See Esposito, “Vom Unpolitischen zur Biopolitik.”

3. Even though the main topic of the lectures on the abnormal is the functioning of the disciplinary power under its psychiatric institutionalization, the passage from the disciplinary power to biopolitical power is more explicit here than in *Discipline and Punish*. It is thus possible to affirm that the Foucaultian genealogy of biopolitics starts with these lectures.

4. Bichat does not understand life, as in the traditional vitalist definition, as the actualization of a prefigured principle of life, nor, as in the mechanist model, as a series of actions and reactions subjected to a determined and therefore calculable causality. He writes of the traditional vitalist notion of life in his *Physiological Researches upon Life and Death*: “Most physicians who have written on vital properties, have begun by seeking out their principle. . . . The soul of Stahl, the archeus of Vanhelmont, the vital principle of Barthez, and the vital power of some others, etc. by turns considered as the only centre of all the actions which bear the character of vitality, have been alternately the common base on which have rested all physiological explanations. These bases have been successively overturned” (64). Following Foucault, the classical debate

between vitalism and mechanism is only the surface phenomenon of the archeological dislocation constituted by the opposition between the organic and the inorganic.

5. In *On the Normal and the Pathological*, Canguilhem states that “the normal is not a static or peaceful, but a dynamic and polemical concept” (146). Foucault picks up on this formulation in his lectures on the abnormal: “The norm is not simply and not even a principle of intelligibility; it is an element on the basis of which a certain exercise of power is founded and legitimized. Canguilhem calls it a polemical concept. Perhaps we could say it is a political concept” (*Abnormal*, 50).

6. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 250.

7. Agamben, “Absolute Immanence,” 233.

8. *Ibid.*, 220.

9. *Ibid.*, 221.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 6.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 85.

14. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181.

15. For an interpretation of Agamben’s theory of the *homo sacer* and the state of exception in terms of latency, see Haverkamp, *Latenzzeit*.

16. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 4.

17. Bichat, *Physiological Researches upon Life and Death*, 121.

18. Bichat, *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort*, 232. Translation mine.

19. Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*.

20. *Ibid.*, 71, 70.

21. Foucault has analyzed this inversion of vitalism into a “mortalism” in *The Birth of the Clinic*: “The irreducibility of the living to the mechanical or chemical is secondary only in relation to the fundamental link between life and death. Vitalism appears against the background of this ‘mortalism’” (145). His reading of Bichat’s *Physiological Researches upon Life and Death* and his affirmation of the permanent presence of death in life led him to the reformulation of the notion of illness by that of “pathological life.” In his short text on the notion of life in the thought of Foucault and Deleuze, Agamben refers to this notion of life determined by death (life as a reaction to death) as the “first” understanding of life, that will be replaced in Foucault’s reflections by life introduced by Canguilhem as the proper domain of error. Against Agamben, I would like to argue that there is neither a *dislocation in the theory of knowledge* nor a *subjective turn* announced by it. Instead, the fundamental relation between life and death prefigures the fallibility of life that gives way to its twofold dynamics and represents the functional model of the governmental.

22. See Macherey, “Normes vitales et normes sociales dans l’Essai sur quelques problèmes concernant le normal et le pathologique de Georges Canguilhem.”

23. See Canguilhem, “Vie,” 532.

24. Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, 95.

25. Canguilhem attributes such a “propulsive value” to the physiological constants that allow the living to behave normatively in the exposed meaning and opposes them to the pathological constants: “The pathological state, on the other hand, expresses the reduction of the norms of life tolerated by the living being, the precariousness of the normal established by disease. Pathological constants have a repulsive and strictly conservative value” (ibid., 137).

26. For an extended discussion of this hypothesis see Muhle, *Eine Genealogie der Biopolitik*.

27. The absence of repression or negation does not presuppose, as Foucault so clearly points out on different occasions, a “better,” “humanist,” or libertarian form of power. What changes profoundly is that the power over death (that has never reached a bigger extension than in the twentieth century as Foucault recalls) exists as the complementary element (the “counterpart”) to the biopolitical strategies that are not directed to the juridical subject, nor the disciplinary individual, but to the biological population. The modern *thanatopolitics* are executed under biopolitical premises, that is, in order to assure the existence of everybody: “Massacres have become vital” (*WK*, 137). The “war of races” is its paradigmatic example.

28. See Lemke, *Biopolitik*, 67.

29. The short analysis that Foucault presents of human rights, the “‘right’ to life, to one’s body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs” (*WK*, 145) as “incomprehensible” for the classical juridical system, is to be understood in a similar way. For an extensive discussion see Raimondi, “Diese andere Sache.”

30. The first shift being oriented toward “the advancement of learning,” that is, the forms of discursive practices that articulated the human sciences, and the second shift that analyzed what it describes as power: “the manifold relations, the open strategies, and the rational techniques that articulate the exercise of powers” (*UP*, 6).

31. For this discussion see Muhle, *Eine Genealogie der Biopolitik*, 276–81; Saar, *Genealogie als Kritik*; and Sarasin, *Foucault zur Einführung*. Saar and Sarasin read Foucault’s technologies of the self from different perspectives as the turn to the subject and therefore an “antidote” to power.

32. Deleuze, *Foucault*, 92.

33. For the development of the notion of “immunitarian democracy” see Brossat, *La démocratie immunitaire*.

34. Foucault, “Power and Strategies,” 142.