



**BIOS**

Biopolitics and Philosophy

Roberto  
ESPOSITO

Translated  
and  
with  
an  
Introduction  
by  
Timothy  
Campbell



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Roberto Esposito

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## Bíos

## Introduction

*France, November 2000.* A decision of the French Appeals Court opens a lacerating conflict in French jurisprudence. Two appeals are overturned, which had in turn reversed the previous sentences. The court recognized that a baby by the name of Nicolas Perruche, who was born with serious genetic lesions, had the right to sue the doctor who had misdiagnosed a case of German measles in the pregnant mother. Against her expressed wishes, she was prevented from aborting. What appears to be the legally irresolvable object of controversy in the entire incident is attributing to small Nicolas the right *not* to be born. At issue is not the proven error of the medical laboratory, but rather the status of the subject who contests it. How can an individual have legal recourse against the only circumstance that furnishes him with juridical subjectivity, namely, that of his own birth? The difficulty is both of a logical and an ontological order. If it is already problematic that a being can invoke his or her right not to be, it is even more difficult to think of a nonbeing (which is precisely who has not yet been born) that claims the right to remain as such, and therefore not to enter into the sphere of being. What appears undecidable in terms of the law is the relation between biological reality and the juridical person, that is, between natural life and a form of life. It is true that being born into such conditions, the baby incurred harm. But who if not he himself could have decided to avoid it, eliminating beforehand his own being as the subject of life, the life proper of a subject? Not only. Because every subjective right corresponds to the obligation of not obstructing those who are in a condition to do so signifies that the mother would have been forced to

abort irrespective of her choice. The right of the fetus not to be born would be configured therefore as a preventive duty on the part of the person who conceived to eliminate him [*sopprimerlo*], instituting in such a way a eugenic caesura, one that is legally recognized, between a juridical life that is judged as valid and another “life unworthy of life,” to use the Nazi phrase.

*Afghanistan, November 2001.* Two months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, a new kind of “humanitarian” war takes shape in the skies above Afghanistan. The adjective *humanitarian* no longer concerns the reasons behind the conflict—as had occurred in Bosnia and Kosovo, namely, to defend entire populations from the threat of ethnic genocide—but its privileged instrument, which is to say air bombardments. And so we find that both highly destructive bombs were released along with provisions and medicine on the same territory at the same time. We must not lose sight of the threshold that is crossed here. The problem doesn’t lie only in the dubious juridical legitimacy of wars fought in the name of universal rights on the basis of arbitrary or biased decisions on the part of those who had the force to impose and execute them, and not even in the lack of uniformity often established between proposed ends and the results that are obtained. The most acute oxymoron of humanitarian bombardment lies rather in the superimposition that is manifested in it between the declared intention to defend life and to produce actual death. The wars of the twentieth century have made us accustomed to the reversal of the proportion between military deaths (which was largely the case before) and civilian victims (which are today far superior to the former). From time immemorial racial persecutions have been based on the presupposition that the death of some strengthens the life of others, but it is precisely for this reason that the demarcation of a clear division between lives to destroy and lives to save endures and indeed grows. It is precisely such a distinction that is tendentiously erased in the logic of bombardments that are destined to kill and protect the same people. The root of such an indistinction is not to be sought, as is often done, in a structural mutation of war, but rather in the much more radical transformation of the idea of *humanitas* that subtends it. Presumed for centuries as what places human beings [*gli uomini*] above the simple common life of other living species (and therefore charged with a political value), *humanitas* increasingly comes to adhere to its own biological material. But once it is reduced to its pure vital substance and for that reason removed from every juridical-political form, the humanity of man remains necessarily exposed to what both saves and annihilates it.



*Russia, October 2002.* Special groups of the Russian state police raid the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow, where a Chechen commando unit is holding almost a thousand people hostage. The incursion results in the death of 128 hostages as well as almost all of the terrorists thanks to an incapacitating and lethal gas. The episode, justified and indeed praised by other governments as a model of firmness, marks another step with respect to the others I've already described. Even if in this case the term "humanitarian" was not used, the underlying logic is no different: the deaths here emerge out of the same desire to save as many lives as possible. Without lingering over other troubling circumstances (such as the use of a gas that was prohibited by international treaties or the impossibility of making available adequate antidotes while keeping secret their very nature), let's consider the point that interests us most. The death of the hostages wasn't an indirect and accidental effect of the raid by law enforcement, which can happen in cases such as these. It wasn't the Chechens, who, surprised by the police assault, killed the hostages, but the police who killed them directly. Frequently one speaks of the specularity of the methods between terrorists and those that face off against them. This is understandable and under certain limits inevitable. But never before does one see governmental agents, charged with saving prisoners from a possible death, carry out the massacre themselves, which the terrorists had themselves only threatened. Various factors weighed in the Russian president's decision: the desire to discourage other attempts of the sort; the message to the Chechens that their fight had no hope of succeeding; and a display of sovereign power in a time of its apparent crisis. But, fundamentally, something else constitutes its tacit assumption. The blitz on the Dubrovka Theater not only marks, as I said, the withdrawal of politics in the face of brute force, nor is it irreducible to the unveiling of an originary connection between politics and evil [*male*]. It is the extreme expression that politics can assume when it faces, without any mediation, the question of the survival of human beings suspended between life and death. To keep them alive at all cost, one can even decide to hasten their death.

*China, February 2003.* The Western media circulates the news (strongly censored by the Chinese government) that in the sole province of Henan there are a million and a half Chinese who are seropositive, with some villages such as Donghu having a percentage that reaches upwards of 80 percent of the population. Unlike other Third World countries, the contagion does not have a natural or a sociocultural cause, but an immediate economic

and political one. At its origin is not unprotected sexual relations nor dirty drug needles, but rather the sale en masse of blood, which the central government encouraged and organized. The blood, which the government had extracted from peasants who were in need of money, was centrifuged in large containers that separated the plasma from the red globules. While the former was sent to rich buyers, the latter was again injected into the donors so as to avoid anemia and to force them into repeating the operation. But it only took one of them to be infected to contaminate the entire stock of blood contained in the huge cauldrons. Thus, entire villages were filled with those who were seropositive, which, given the lack of medicine, became a death sentence. It is true that China has recently sold cheap anti-AIDS medicines produced locally on the market, but it did not make them available to the peasants of Henan, whom it not only ignored, but whom it obliged to keep quiet at the risk of imprisonment. The affair was revealed by someone who, left alone after the deaths of his relatives, preferred dying in prison rather than in his own hut alone. It's enough to move our gaze onto another, larger phenomenon to see that biological selection in a country that continues to define itself as communist isn't only of class, but also of sex. This happens at the moment when the state policy of "a single child" (which was intended to halt a growing demographic) is joined to the technology of ecography, causing the abortion of a large number of those who would have become future women. This made the former traditional practice in the countryside, of drowning female infants upon birth, unnecessary, but it was bound to augment the numerical disproportion between males and females. It has been calculated that in less than twenty years it will be difficult for Chinese men to find a wife, if they don't tear her away from her family as an adolescent. Perhaps it's for this reason that in China the relation between female and male suicides is five to one.

*Rwanda, April 2004.* A United Nations report tells us that around ten thousand babies of the same age are the biological result of mass ethnic rapes that occurred ten years ago during the genocide that the Hutu committed on the Tutsi. As occurred later in Bosnia and other parts of the world, such a practice modified in original ways the relation between life and death that had until then been recognized in traditional wars and even in those so-called asymmetrical wars against terrorists. While in these wars death always comes from life—and even comes *through* life as in kamikaze suicide attacks—in the act of ethnic rape it is also life that emerges from death,

from violence, and from the terror of women who were made pregnant while unconscious from the blows they had received or immobilized with a knife to their throat. It is an example of “positive” eugenics that is not juxtaposed to the negative one practiced in China or elsewhere, but rather constitutes its counterfactual result. Whereas the Nazis and all their imitators carried out genocide by preemptively destroying birth, those of today do so through forced birth and therefore in the most drastic perversion of the event that brings essence to self [*in sé l'essenza*], other than the promise of life. Contrary to those who saw in the newness of birth the symbolic and real presupposition for renewed political action, ethnic rape makes it the most acute point of connection between life and death, but which occurs in the tragic paradox of a new generation of life. That all Rwandan mothers of the war, when asked about their own experiences, declared their love for their children born from hate signifies that the force of life prevails once again over that of death. Furthermore, the most extreme immunity practice, which is to say affirming the superiority of one's own blood to the point of imposing it on those with whom one does not share it, is destined to be turned against itself, producing exactly what it wanted to avoid. The Hutu children of Tutsi women, or the Tutsi children of Hutu men, are the objective communitarian, which is to say multiethnic outcome of the most violent racial immunization. We are faced here too with a sort of undecidability, or a double-faced phenomenon in which life and politics are joined in a relation whose interpretation demands a new conceptual language.

At the center of such a language is the notion of biopolitics. It is by starting with biopolitics that events such as those I've just described, which escape a more traditional interpretation, find a complex of meaning that moves beyond their simple manifestation. It is true that they provide an extreme image (though certainly not unfaithful) of a dynamic that already involves all the most important political phenomena of our time. From the war of and against terrorism to mass migrations; from the politics of public health to those of demography; from measures of security to the unlimited extension of emergency legislation—there is no phenomenon of international importance that is extraneous to the double tendency that situates the episodes I've just described within a single line of meaning. On the one hand, a growing superimposition between the domain of power or of law [*diritto*] and that of life; on the other, an equally close implication

that seems to have been derived with regard to death. It is exactly the tragic paradox that Michel Foucault, in a series of writings dating back to the middle of the 1970s, examined. Why does a politics of life always risk being reversed into a work of death?

I think I can say, without failing to acknowledge the extraordinary analytic power of his work, that Foucault never fully answered the question; or better, that he always hesitated choosing from among different responses, responses that were for their part tributaries of different modes of approaching the question that he himself had raised. The opposite interpretations of biopolitics, the one radically negative and the other absolutely euphoric that today lead the field, do nothing except make absolute (by spreading them apart) the two hermeneutic options between which Foucault never decided. Without anticipating here a more detailed reconstruction of the affair, my impression is that this situation of philosophical and political stalemate originates with a question that is either missing or has been insufficiently posed concerning the presuppositions of the theme in question: not just what biopolitics signifies but how it was born. How is it configured over time and which aporias does it continue to carry? It's enough to extend research on the diachronic axis as well the horizontal level to recognize that Foucault's decisive theorizations are nothing but the final segment (as well as the most accomplished) of a line of discourse that goes rather further back in time, to the beginning of the last century. To bring to light this lexical tradition (for the first time I would add), revealing its contiguity and semantic intervals, obviously doesn't only have a philological emphasis, because only a similar kind of operation of excavation promotes the force and originality of Foucault's thesis through differences with it; but above all because it allows us to peer into the black box of biopolitics from a variety of angles and with a greater breadth of gaze. It becomes possible to construct a critical perspective on the interpretive path that Foucault himself created; for example, with reference to the complex relationship, which he instituted, between the biopolitical regime and sovereign power. We will return in more detail to this specific point further on, but what ought to draw our attention—because it involves the very same meaning of the category in question—is the relation between the politics of life and the ensemble of modern political categories. Does biopolitics precede, follow, or coincide temporally with modernity? Does it have a historical, epochal, or originary dimension? Foucault's response to such a question is not completely clear, a question that is decisive because it is logically connected to the interpreta-

tion of contemporary experience. He oscillates between a continuist attitude and another that is more inclined to mark differential thresholds.

My thesis is that this kind of an epistemological uncertainty is attributable to the failure to use a more ductile paradigm, one that is capable of articulating in a more intrinsic manner the two lemmas that are enclosed in the concept in question, which I have for some time now referred to in terms of immunization. Without expanding here on its overall meaning (which I've had occasion to define elsewhere in all its projections of sense), the element that quickly needs to be established is the peculiar knot that immunization posits between biopolitics and modernity.<sup>1</sup> I say quickly because it restores the missing link of Foucault's argumentation. What I want to say is that only when biopolitics is linked conceptually to the immunitary dynamic of the negative protection of life does biopolitics reveal its specifically modern genesis. This is not because its roots are missing in other preceding epochs (they aren't), but because only modernity makes of individual self-preservation the presupposition of all other political categories, from sovereignty to liberty. Naturally, the fact that modern biopolitics is also embodied through the mediation of categories that are still ascribable to the idea of order (understood as the transcendental of the relation between power and subjects) means that the politicity of *bíos* is still not affirmed absolutely. So that it might be, which is to say so that life is *immediately* translatable into politics or so that politics might assume an *intrinsically* biological characterization, we have to wait for the totalitarian turning point of the 1930s, in particular for Nazism. There, not only the negative (which is to say the work of death) will be functionalized to stabilize order (as certainly was still the case in the modern period), but it will be produced in growing quantities according to a thanatopolitical dialectic that is bound to condition the strengthening of life vis-à-vis the ever more extensive realization of death.

In the point of passage from the first to the second form of immunization will be found the works of Nietzsche, to whom I've dedicated an entire chapter of this book. I have done so not only for his underlying biopolitical relevance, but because he constitutes an extraordinary seismograph of the exhaustion of modern political categories when mediating between politics and life. To assume the will of power as the fundamental vital impulse means affirming at the same time that life has a constitutively political dimension and that politics has no other object than the maintenance and expansion of life. It is precisely in the relationship between these two ultimate modes

of referring to *bíos* that the innovative or conservative, or active or reactive character of forces facing each other is established. Nietzsche himself and the meaning of his works is part of this comparison and struggle, in the sense that together they express the most explicit criticism of the modern immunitary loss of meaning and an element of acceleration from within. From here a categorical as well as stylistic splitting occurs between two tonalities of thought juxtaposed and interwoven that constitutes the most typical cipher of the Nietzschean text: destined on the one side to anticipate, at least on the theoretical level, the destructive and self-destructive slippage of twentieth-century biocracy, and on the other the prefiguration of the lines of an affirmative biopolitics that has yet to come.

The final section of the book is dedicated to the relation between philosophy and biopolitics *after Nazism*. Why do I insist on referring philosophy to what wanted to be the most explicit negation of philosophy as ever appeared? Well, first because it is precisely a similar negation that demands to be understood philosophically in its darkest corners. And then because Nazism negated philosophy not only generically, but in favor of biology, of which it considered itself to be the most accomplished realization. I examine in detail this thesis in an extensive chapter here, corroborating its truthfulness, at least in the literal sense that the Nazi regime brought the biologization of politics to a point that had never been reached previously. Nazism treated the German people as an organic body that needed a radical cure, which consisted in the violent removal of a part that was already considered spiritually dead. From this perspective and in contrast to communism (which is still joined in posthumous homage to the category of totalitarianism), Nazism is no longer inscribable in the self-preserving dynamic of both the early and later modernities; and certainly not because it is extraneous to immunitary logic. On the contrary, Nazism works within that logic in such a paroxysmal manner as to turn the protective apparatus against its own body, which is precisely what happens in autoimmune diseases. The final orders of self-destruction put forward by Hitler barricaded in his Berlin bunker offer overwhelming proof. From this point of view, one can say that the Nazi experience represents the culmination of biopolitics, at least in that qualified expression of being absolutely indistinct from its reversal into thanatopolitics. But precisely for this reason the catastrophe in which it is immersed constitutes the occasion for an epochal rethinking of a category that, far from disappearing, every day acquires more meaning, not

only in the events I noted above, but also in the overall configuration of contemporary experience, and above all from the moment when the implosion of Soviet communism cleared the field of the last philosophy of modern history, delivering us over to a world that is completely globalized.

It is at this level that discourse today is to be conducted: the body that experiences ever more intensely the indistinction between power and life is no longer that of the individual, nor is it that sovereign body of nations, but that body of the world that is both torn and unified. Never before as today do the conflicts, wounds, and fears that tear the body to pieces seem to put into play nothing less than life itself in a singular reversal between the classic philosophical theme of the “world of life” and that theme heard so often today of the “life of the world.” This is the reason that contemporary thought cannot fool itself (as still happens today) in belatedly defending modern political categories that have been shaken and overturned. Contemporary thought cannot and must not do anything of the sort, because biopolitics originates precisely in these political categories, before it rebels against them; and then because the heart of the problem that we are facing, which is to say the modification of *bíos* by a part of politics identified with technology [*tecnica*], was posed for the first time (in a manner that would be insufficient to define as apocalyptic), precisely in the antiphilosophical and biological philosophy of Hitlerism. I do realize how delicate this kind of statement may seem in its contents and still more in its resonance, but it isn’t possible to place questions of expediency before the truth of the matters at hand. From another perspective, twentieth-century thought has from the beginning implicitly understood this, accepting the comparison and the struggle with radical evil on its own terrain. It was so for Heidegger, along an itinerary that brought him so close to that vortex that he risked letting himself be swallowed by it. But the same was also true for Arendt and Foucault, both of whom were conscious, albeit in different ways, that one could rise above Nazism only by knowing its drifts and its precipices. It is the path that I myself have tried to follow here, working back to front within three Nazi *dispositifs*: the *absolute normativization of life*, the *double enclosure of the body*, and the *anticipatory suppression of birth*. I have traced them with the intention of profiling the admittedly approximate and provisional contours of an affirmative biopolitics that is capable of overturning the Nazi politics of death in a politics that is no longer over life but *of* life.

Here there is a final point that seems to me useful to clarify before proceeding. Without denying the legitimacy of other interpretations or other normative projects, I do not believe the task of philosophy—even when biopolitics challenges it—is that of proposing models of political action that make biopolitics the flag of a revolutionary manifesto or merely something reformist. This isn't because it is too radical a concept but because it isn't radical enough. This would, moreover, contradict the initial presupposition according to which it is no longer possible to disarticulate politics and life in a form in which the former can provide orientation to the latter. This is not to say, of course, that politics is incapable of acting on what is both its object and subject; loosening the grip of new sovereign powers is possible and necessary. Perhaps what we need today, at least for those who practice philosophy, is the converse: not so much to think life as a function of politics, but to think politics within the same form of life. It is a step that is anything but easy because it would be concerned with bringing life into relation with biopolitics not from the outside—in the modality of accepting or refusing—but from within; to open life to the point at which something emerges which had until today remained out of view because it is held tightly in the grip of its opposite. I have attempted to offer more than one example of such a possibility and of such a demand with regard to the figure of *flesh*, *norm*, and *birth* thought inversely with respect to body, law, and nation. But the most general and intense dimension of this constructive deconstruction has to do precisely with that immunitary paradigm that constitutes the distinctive mode in which biopolitics has until now been put forward. Never more than in this case does its semantics, that of the negative protection of life, reveal a fundamental relation with its communitarian opposite. If *immunitas* is not even thinkable outside of the common *munus* that also negates it, perhaps biopolitics, which until now has been folded tightly into it, can also turn its negative sign into a different, positive sense.



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Enigma of Biopolitics

#### Bio/politics

Recently, not only has the notion of “biopolitics” moved to the center of international debate, but the term has opened a completely new phase in contemporary thought. From the moment that Michel Foucault re-proposed and redefined the concept (when not coining it), the entire frame of political philosophy emerged as profoundly modified. It wasn’t that classical categories such as those of “law” [*diritto*], “sovereignty,” and “democracy” suddenly left the scene—they continue to organize current political discourse—but that their effective meaning always appears weaker and lacking any real interpretive capacity. Rather than explaining a reality that everywhere slips through their analytic grip, these categories themselves demand to be subjected to the scrutiny of a more penetrating gaze that both deconstructs and explains them. Let’s consider, for instance, law [*legge*]. Differently from what many have argued, there is nothing that suggests that such a domain has somehow been reduced. On the contrary, the impression is that the domain of law is gaining terrain both domestically and internationally; that the process of normativization is investing increasingly wider spaces. Nevertheless, this doesn’t mean that juridical language per se reveals itself to be incapable of illuminating the profound logic of such a change. When one speaks of “human rights,” for example, rather than referring to established juridical subjects, one refers to individuals defined by nothing other than the simple fact of being alive. Something analogous can be said about the political *dispositif* of sovereignty. Anything but destined to weaken as

some had rashly forecast (at least with regard to the world's greatest power), sovereignty seems to have extended and intensified its range of action—beyond a repertoire that for centuries had characterized its relation to both citizens and other state structures. With the clear distinction between inside and outside weakened (and therefore also the distinction between war and peace that had characterized sovereign power for so long), sovereignty finds itself directly engaged with questions of life and death that no longer have to do with single areas, but with the world in all of its extensions. Therefore, if we take up any perspective, we see that something that goes beyond the customary language appears to involve directly law and politics, dragging them into a dimension that is outside their conceptual apparatuses. This “something”—this element and this substance, this substrate and this upheaval—is precisely the object of biopolitics.

Yet there doesn't appear to be an adequate categorical exactitude that corresponds to the epochal relevance of biopolitics. Far from having acquired a definitive order, the concept of biopolitics appears to be traversed by an uncertainty, by an uneasiness that impedes every stable connotation. Indeed, I would go further. Biopolitics is exposed to a growing hermeneutic pressure that seems to make it not only the instrument but also the object of a bitter philosophical and political fight over the configuration and destiny of the current age. From here its oscillation (though one could well say its disruption) between interpretations, and before that even its different, indeed conflicting tonalities. What is at stake of course is the nature of the relation that forces together the two terms that make up the category of biopolitics. But even before that its definition: what do we understand by *bíos* and how do we want to think a politics that directly addresses it? The reference to the classic figure of *bíos politikos* doesn't help, since the semantics in question become meaningful precisely when the meaning of the term withdraws. If we want to remain with the Greek (and in particular with the Aristotelian) lexicon, biopolitics refers, if anything, to the dimension of *zōē*, which is to say to life in its simple biological capacity [*tenuta*], more than it does to *bíos*, understood as “qualified life” or “form of life,” or at least to the line of conjugation along which *bíos* is exposed to *zōē*, naturalizing *bíos* as well. But precisely with regard to this terminological exchange, the idea of biopolitics appears to be situated in a zone of double indiscernibility, first because it is inhabited by a term that does not belong to it and indeed risks distorting it. And then because it is fixed by a concept, precisely that of *zōē*, which is stripped of every formal

connotation. *Zōē* itself can only be defined problematically: what, assuming it is even conceivable, is an absolutely natural life? It's even more the case today, when the human body appears to be increasingly challenged and also literally traversed by technology [*tecnica*].<sup>1</sup> Politics penetrates directly in life and life becomes other from itself. Thus, if a natural life doesn't exist that isn't at the same time technological as well; if the relation between *bíos* and *zōē* needs by now (or has always needed) to include in it a third correlated term, *technē*—then how do we hypothesize an exclusive relation between politics and life?

Here too the concept of biopolitics seems to withdraw or be emptied of content in the same moment in which it is formulated. What remains clear is its negative value, what it is *not* or the horizon of sense that marks its closing. Biopolitics has to do with that complex of mediations, oppositions, and dialectical operations that in an extended phase made possible the modern political order, at least according to current interpretation. With respect to these and the questions and problems to which they correspond relative to the definition of power, to the measure of its exercise and to the delineation of its limits, it's indisputable that a general shift of field, logic, and the object of politics has taken place. At the moment in which on one side the modern distinctions between public and private, state and society, local and global collapse, and on the other that all other sources of legitimacy dry up, life becomes encamped in the center of every political procedure. No other politics is conceivable other than a politics of life, in the objective and subjective sense of the term. But it is precisely with reference to the relation between the subject and object of politics that the interpretive divergence to which I alluded earlier appears again: How are we to comprehend a political government of life? In what sense does life govern politics or in what sense does politics govern life? Does it concern a governing *of* or *over* life? It is the same conceptual alternative that one can express through the lexical bifurcation between the terms, used indifferently sometimes, of "biopolitics" and "biopower." By the first is meant a politics in the name of life and by the second a life subjected to the command of politics. But here too in this mode the paradigm that seeks a conceptual linking between the terms emerges as split, as if it had been cut in two by the very same movement. Compressed (and at the same time destabilized) by competing readings and subject to continuous rotations of meaning around its own axis, the concept of biopolitics risks losing its identity and becoming an enigma.

To understand why, it isn't enough to limit our perspective simply to Foucault's observations. Rather, we need to return to those texts and to authors (often not cited) that Foucault's discussion derives from, and against which he repositions himself, while critically deconstructing them. These can be cataloged in three distinct and successive blocks in time (at least those that explicitly refer to the concept of biopolitics). They are characterized, respectively, by an approach that is organistic, anthropological, and naturalistic. In the first instance, they refer to a substantial series of essays, primarily German, that are joined by a vitalistic conception of the state, such as Karl Binding's *Zum Werden und Leben der Staaten* (1920), of which we will have occasion to speak later; Eberhard Dennert's *Der Staat als lebendiger Organismus* (1920); and Edward Hahn's *Der Staat, ein Lebewesen* (1926).<sup>2</sup> Our attention will be focused, however, most intently on the Swede Rudolph Kjellén, probably because he was the first to employ the term "biopolitics" (we also owe him the expression "geopolitics" that Friedrich Ratzel and Karl Haushofer will later elaborate in a decidedly racist key). With respect to such a racist propensity, which will shortly thereafter culminate in the Nazi theorization of a "vital space" (*Lebensraum*) we should note that Kjellén's position remains less conspicuous, despite his proclaimed sympathy for Wilhelminian German as well as a certain propensity for an aggressive foreign policy. As he had previously argued in his book of 1905 on the great powers, vigorous states, endowed with a limited territory, discover the need for extending their borders through the conquest, fusion, and colonialization of other lands.<sup>3</sup> But it's in the volume from 1916 titled *The State as Form of Life* that Kjellén sees this geopolitical demand as existing in close relation to an organistic conception that is irreducible to constitutional theories of a liberal framework.<sup>4</sup> While these latter represent the state as the artificial product of a free choice of individuals that have created it, he understands it to be a "living form" (*som livsform* in Swedish or *als Lebensform* in German), to the extent that it is furnished with instincts and natural drives. Already here in this transformation of the idea of the state, according to which the state is no longer a subject of law born from a voluntary contract but a whole that is integrated by men and which behaves as a single individual both spiritual and corporeal, we can trace the originary nucleus of biopolitical semantics. In *Outline for a Political System*, Kjellén brings together a compendium of the preceding theses:

This tension that is characteristic of life itself . . . pushed me to denominate such a discipline *biopolitics*, which is analogous with the science of life, namely, biology. In so doing we gain much, considering that the Greek word *bios* designates not only natural and physical life, but perhaps just as significantly cultural life. Naming it in this way also expresses that dependence of the laws of life that society manifests and that promote, more than anything else, the state itself to that role of arbiter or at a minimum of mediator.<sup>5</sup>

These are expressions that take us beyond the ancient metaphor of the body-state with all its multiple metamorphoses of post-Romantic inspiration. What begins to be glimpsed here is the reference to a natural substrate, to a substantial principle that is resistant and that underlies any abstraction or construction of institutional character. The idea of the impossibility of a true overcoming of the natural state in that of the political emerges in opposition to the modern conception derived from Hobbes that one can preserve life only by instituting an artificial barrier with regard to nature, which is itself incapable of neutralizing the conflict (and indeed is bound to strengthen it). Anything but the negation of nature, the political is nothing else but the continuation of nature at another level and therefore destined to incorporate and reproduce nature's original characteristics.

If this process of the naturalization of politics in Kjellén remains inscribed within a historical-cultural apparatus, it experiences a decisive acceleration in the essay that is destined to become famous precisely in the field of comparative biology. I am referring to *Staatsbiologie*, which was also published in 1920 by Baron Jakob von Uexküll with the symptomatic subtitle *Anatomy, Physiology, and Pathology of the State*.<sup>6</sup> Here, as with Kjellén, the discourse revolves around the biological configuration of a state-body that is unified by harmonic relations of its own organs, representative of different professions and competencies, but with a dual (and anything but irrelevant) lexical shift with respect to the preceding model. Here what is spoken about is not any state but the German state with its peculiar characteristics and vital demands. What makes the difference, however, is chiefly the emphasis that pathology assumes with respect to what is subordinated to it, namely, anatomy and physiology. Here we can already spot the harbinger of a theoretical weaving—that of the degenerative syndrome and the consequent regenerative program—fated to reach its macabre splendors in the following decades. Threatening the public

health of the German body is a series of diseases, which obviously, referring to the revolutionary traumas of the time, are located in subversive trade unionism, electoral democracy, and the right to strike: tumors that grow in the tissues of the state, causing anarchy and finally the state's dissolution. It would be "as if the majority of the cells in our body (rather than those in our brain) decided which impulses to communicate to the nerves."<sup>7</sup> But even more relevant, if we consider the direction of future totalitarian developments, is the biopolitical reference to those "parasites" which, having penetrated the political body, organize themselves to the disadvantage of other citizens. These are divided between "symbionts" from different races who under certain circumstances can be useful to the state and true parasites, which install themselves as an extraneous living body within the state, and which feed off of the same vital substance. Uexküll's threateningly prophetic conclusion is that one needs to create a class of state doctors to fight the parasites, or to confer on the state a medical competency that is capable of bringing it back to health by removing the causes of the disease and by expelling the carriers of germs. He writes: "What we are still lacking is an academy with a forward-looking vision not only for creating a class of state doctors, but also for instituting a state system of medicine. We possess no organ to which we can trust the hygiene of the state."<sup>8</sup>

The third text that should hold our attention—because it is expressly dedicated to the category in question—is *Bio-politics*. Written by the Englishman Morley Roberts, it was published in London in 1938 with the subtitle *An Essay in the Physiology, Pathology and Politics of the Social and Somatic Organism*.<sup>9</sup> Here too the underlying assumption, which Roberts sets forth immediately in the book's introduction, is the connection, not only analogical, but real, between politics and biology, and particularly medicine. His perspective is not so distant fundamentally from that of Uexküll. If physiology is indivisible from the pathology from which it derives its meaning and emphasis, the state organism cannot be truly known or guided except by evaluating its actual and potential diseases. More than a simple risk, these diseases represent the ultimate truth because it is principally a living entity that in fact can die. For this reason, biopolitics has the assignment on the one hand of recognizing the organic risks that jeopardize the body politic and on the other of locating and predisposing mechanisms of defense against them; these too are rooted in the same biological terrain. The most innovative part of Roberts's book is connected precisely to this ultimate

demand and is constituted by an extraordinary comparison between the defensive apparatus of the state and the immunitary system that anticipates an interpretive paradigm to which we will return:

The simplest way to think of immunity is to look on the human body as a complex social organism, and the national organism as a simpler functional individual, or “person,” both of which are exposed to dangers of innumerable kinds for which they must continually provide. This provision is immunity in action.<sup>10</sup>

Beginning with this first formulation, Roberts develops a parallel between the state and the human body involving the entire immunological repertoire—from antigens to antibodies, from the function of tolerance to the reticuloendothelial system—and finds in each biological element its political equivalent. The most significant step, however, one that moves in the direction previously taken by Uexküll, is perhaps constituted by the reference to mechanisms of immunitary repulsion and expulsion of the racial sort:

The student of political biology should study national mass attitudes and their results as if they were actual secretions or excretion. National or international repulsions may rest on little. To put the matter at once on the lowest physiological level, it is well known that the smell of one race may offend as much or even more than different habits and customs.<sup>11</sup>

That Roberts’s text closes with a comparison between an immunitary rejection of the Jews by the English and an anaphylactic shock of the political body in the year in which the Second World War begins is indicative of the increasingly slippery slope that the first biopolitical elaboration takes on: a politics constructed directly on *bíos* always risks violently subjecting *bíos* to politics.

The second wave of interest in the thematic of biopolitics is registered in France in the 1960s. The difference from the first wave is all too obvious and it couldn’t be otherwise in a historical frame that was profoundly modified by the epochal defeat of Nazi biocracy. The new biopolitical theory appeared to be conscious of the necessity of a semantic reformulation even at the cost of weakening the specificity of the category in favor of a more domesticated neohumanistic declension, with respect not only to Nazi biocracy, but also to organistic theories that had in some way anticipated their themes and accents. The volume that in 1960 virtually opened this new stage of study was programmatically titled *La biopolitique: Essai d’interprétation de l’histoire de l’humanité et des civilisations* [Biopolitics: An essay on

the interpretation and history of humanity and civilization], and it takes exactly this step.<sup>12</sup> Already the double reference to history and humanity as the coordinates of a discourse intentionally oriented toward *bíos* expresses the central direction and conciliatory path of Aroon Starobinski's essay. When he writes that "biopolitics is an attempt to explain the history of civilization on the basis of the laws of cellular life as well as the most elementary biological life," he does not in fact intend to push his treatment toward a sort of naturalistic outcome.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, the author argues (sometimes even acknowledging the negative connotations that the natural powers [*potenze*] of life enjoy), for the possibility as well as the necessity that politics incorporates spiritual elements that are capable of governing these natural powers in function of metapolitical values:

Biopolitics doesn't negate in any way the blind forces of violence and the will to power, nor the forces of self-destruction that exist in man and in human civilization. On the contrary, biopolitics affirms their existence in a way that is completely particular because these forces are the elementary forces of life. But biopolitics denies that these forces are fatal and that they cannot be opposed and directed by spiritual forces: the forces of justice, charity, and truth.<sup>14</sup>

That the concept of biopolitics thus risks being whittled down to the point of losing its meaning, that is, of being overturned into a sort of traditional humanism, is also made clear in a second text published four years later by an author destined for greater fortune. I am referring to Edgar Morin's *Introduction à une politique de l'homme*.<sup>15</sup> Here the "fields" that are truly "biopolitical of life and of survival" are included in a more sweeping aggregate of the "anthropolitical" type, which in turn refers to the project of a "multidimensional politics of man."<sup>16</sup> Rather than tightening the biological-political nexus, Morin situates his perspective on the problematic connection in which the infrapolitical themes of minimal survival are productively crossed with those that are suprapolitical or philosophical, relative to the sense of life itself. The result, more than a biopolitics in the strict sense of the expression, is a sort of "onto-politics," which is given the task of circumscribing the development of the human species, limiting the tendency to see it as economic and productive. "And so all the paths of life and all the paths of politics begin to intersect and then to penetrate one another. They announce an onto-politics that is becoming ever more intimately and globally man's being."<sup>17</sup> Although Morin, in the following book dedicated to the paradigm of human nature, contests in a partially self-critical



key the humanistic mythology that defines man in opposition to the animal, culture in opposition to nature, and order in opposition to disorder, there doesn't seem to emerge from all this an idea of biopolitics endowed with a convincing physiognomy.<sup>18</sup>

Here we are dealing with a theoretical weakness as well as a semantic uncertainty to which the two volumes of *Cahiers de la biopolitique*, published in Paris at the end of the 1960s by the Organisation au Service de la Vie, certainly do not put an end. It is true that with respect to the preceding essay we can recognize in them a more concrete attention to the real conditions of life of the world's population, exposed to a double checkmate of neocapitalism and socialist realism—both incapable of guiding productive development in a direction that is compatible with a significant increase in the quality of life. And it is also true that in several of these texts criticism of the current economic and political model is substantiated in references concerning technology, city planning, and medicine (or better the spaces and the material forms of living beings). Still, not even here can we say that the definition of biopolitics avoids a categorical genericness that will wind up reducing its hermeneutic scope: "Biopolitics was defined as a science by the conduct of states and human collectives, determined by laws, the natural environment, and ontological givens that support life and determine man's activities."<sup>19</sup> There is, however, no suggestion in such a definition of what the specific statute of its object or a critical analysis of its effects might be. Much like the Days of Biopolitical Research held in Bordeaux in December 1966, so too these works have difficulty freeing the concept of biopolitics from a mannerist formulation into a meaningful conceptual elaboration.<sup>20</sup>

The third resumption of biopolitical studies took place in the Anglo-Saxon world and it is one that is still ongoing. We can locate its formal introduction in 1973, when the International Political Science Association officially opened a research site on biology and politics. After that various international conventions were organized, the first of which took place in Paris in 1975 at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Humaines and another at Bellagio, in Warsaw, Chicago, and New York. In 1983, the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences was founded, as was the journal *Politics and Life Sciences* two years later, as well as the series *Research in Biopolitics* (of which a number of volumes were published).<sup>21</sup> But to locate the beginning of this sort of research we need to return to the middle of the 1960s when two texts appeared that elaborated the biopolitical lexicon. If Lynton K.

Caldwell was the first to adopt the term in question in his 1964 article “Biopolitics: Science, Ethics, and Public Policy,” the two polarities within which is inscribed the general sense of this new biopolitical thematization can be traced to the previous year’s *Human Nature in Politics* by James C. Davies.<sup>22</sup> It is no coincidence that when Roger D. Masters attempts to systematize the thesis in a volume (dedicated, however, to Leo Strauss) twenty years later, he will eventually give it a similar title, *The Nature of Politics*.<sup>23</sup> These are precisely the two terms that constitute both the object and the perspective of a biopolitical discourse, which after its organistic declension in the 1920s and 1930s and its neohumanistic one of the 1960s in France, now acquires a marked naturalistic character. Leaving aside the quality of this production, which in general is admittedly mediocre, its symptomatic value resides precisely in the direct and insistent reference made to the sphere of nature as a privileged parameter of political determination. What emerges—not always with full theoretical knowledge on the part of the authors—is a considerable categorical shift with respect to the principal line of modern political philosophy. While political philosophy presupposes nature as the problem to resolve (or the obstacle to overcome) through the constitution of the political order, American biopolitics sees in nature its same condition of existence: not only the genetic origin and the first material, but also the sole controlling reference. Politics is anything but able to dominate nature or “conform” [*formare*] to its ends and so itself emerges “informed” in such a way that it leaves no space for other constructive possibilities.

At the origin of such an approach can be distinguished two matrices: on the one side, Darwinian evolution (or more precisely social Darwinism), and, on the other, the ethological research, developed principally in Germany at the end of the 1930s. With regard to the first, the most important point of departure is to be sought in *Physics and Politics* by Walter Bagehot within a horizon that includes authors as diverse as Spencer and Sumner, Ratzel and Gumplowitz.<sup>24</sup> The clear warning, however, is that the emphasis of the biopolitical perspective resides in the passage from a physical paradigm to one that is exactly biological, something that Thomas Thorson underscores forcefully in his book from 1970 with the programmatic title *Biopolitics*.<sup>25</sup> What matters, therefore, is not so much conferring the label of an exact science on politics as referring it back to its natural domain, by which is understood the vital terrain from which it emerges and to which it inevitably returns.<sup>26</sup> Above all, we are dealing with the contingent condition of our body, which keeps human action within the limits of a determinate

anatomical and physical possibility, but also the biological or indeed genetic baggage of the subject in question (to use the lexicon of a nascent sociobiology). Against the thesis that social events require complex historic explanations, they refer here finally to dynamics that are tied to evolutive demands of a species such as ours, different quantitatively but not qualitatively from the animal that precedes and comprises our species. In this way, not only does the predominantly aggressive behavior of man (as well as the cooperative) refer to an instinctive modality of the animal sort, but insofar as it inheres in our feral nature, war ends up taking on a characteristic of inevitability.<sup>27</sup> All political behavior that repeats itself with a certain frequency in history—from the control of territory to social hierarchy to the domination of women—is deeply rooted in a prehuman layer not only to which we remain tied, but which is usually bound to resurface. In this interpretive framework, democratic societies are not impossible in themselves, but appear in the form of parentheses that are destined to be quickly closed (or that at least allow one to see the dark depths out of which they contradictorily emerge). The implicit and often explicit conclusion of the reasoning is that any institution or subjective option that doesn't conform, or at least adapt, to such a given is destined to fail.

The biopolitical notion that emerges at this point is sufficiently clear, as Somit and Peterson, the most credentialed theoreticians of this interpretive line express it.<sup>28</sup> What remains problematic, however, is the final point, which is to say the relation between the analytic-descriptive relation and that of the propositional-normative (all because it is one thing to study, explain, and forecast and another to prescribe). Yet it is precisely in this postponement from the first to the second meaning, that is, from the level of being to that of requirement, that the densest ideological valence is concentrated in the entire discourse.<sup>29</sup> The semantic passage is conducted through the double versant of fact and value in the concept of nature. It is used as both a given and a task, as the presupposition and the result, and as the origin and the end. If political behavior is inextricably embedded in the dimension of *bíos* and if *bíos* is what connects human beings [*l'uomo*] to the sphere of nature, it follows that the only politics possible will be the one that is already inscribed in our natural code. Of course, we cannot miss the rhetorical short-circuit on which the entire argument rests: no longer does the theory interpret reality, but reality determines a theory that in turn is destined to corroborate it. The response is announced even before the analysis is begun: human beings cannot be other than what they

have always been. Brought back to its natural, innermost part, politics remains in the grip of biology without being able to reply. Human history is nothing but our nature repeated, sometimes misshapen, but never really different. The role of science (but especially of politics) is that of impeding the opening of too broad a gap between nature and history; making our nature, in the final analysis, our only history. The enigma of biopolitics appears resolved, but in a form that assumes exactly what needs to be “researched.”

### Politics, Nature, History

From a certain point of view it's understandable that Foucault never gestured to the different biopolitical interpretations that preceded his own—from the moment in which his extraordinary survey is born precisely from the distance he takes up with regard to his predecessors. This doesn't mean that no points of contact exist, if not with their positive contents, then with the critical demand that follows from them, which refers more broadly to a general dissatisfaction with how modernity has constructed the relation among politics, nature, and history. It is only here that the work begun by Foucault in the middle of the 1970s manifests a complexity and a radicality that are utterly incomparable with the preceding theorizations. It isn't irrelevant that Foucault's specific biopolitical perspective is indebted in the first place to Nietzschean genealogy. This is because it is precisely from genealogy that Foucault derives that oblique capacity for disassembly and conceptual reelaboration that gives his work the originality that everyone has recognized. When Foucault, returning to the Kantian question surrounding the meaning of the Enlightenment, establishes a contemporary point of view, he doesn't simply allude to a different mode of seeing things that the past receives from the present, but also to the interval that such a point of view of the present opens between the past and its self-interpretation. From this perspective, Foucault doesn't think of the end of the modern epoch—or at least the analytic block of its categories highlighted by the first biopolitical theorizations—as a point or a line that interrupts an epochal journey, but rather as the disruption of its trajectory produced by a different sort of gaze: if the present isn't what (or only what) we have assumed it to be until now; if its meanings begin to cluster around a different semantic epicenter; if something novel or ancient emerges from within that contests the mannerist image; this means, then, that the past, which nonetheless the present derives from, is no longer necessarily the

same. This can reveal a face, an aspect, or a profile that before was obscured or perhaps hidden by a superimposed (and at times imposed) narrative; not necessarily a false narrative, but instead functional to its prevailing logic, and for this reason partial, when not tendentious.

Foucault identifies this narrative, which compresses or represses with increasing difficulty something that is heterogeneous to its own language, with the discourse on sovereignty. Despite the infinite variations and transformations to which it has been subjected in the course of modernity on the part of those who have made use of it, sovereignty has always been based on the same figural schema: that of the existence of two distinct entities, namely, the totality of individuals and power that at a certain point enters into relation between individuals in the modalities defined by a third element, which is constituted by the law. We can say that all modern philosophies, despite their heterogeneity or apparent opposition, are arranged within this triangular grid, now one, now the other, of its poles. That these affirm the absolute character of sovereign power according to the Hobbesian model or that, on the contrary, they insist on its limits in line with the liberal tradition; that they subtract or subject the monarch with respect to the laws that he himself has promulgated; that they subject or distinguish the principles of legality and of legitimacy—what remains common to all these conceptions is the *ratio* that subtends them, which is precisely the one characterized by the preexistence of subjects to sovereign power that these conceptions introduce and therefore by the rights [*diritto*] that in this mode they maintain in relation to subjects. Even apart from the breadth of such rights—one that moves from the minimum of the preservation of life and the maximum of participation in political government—the role of counterweight that is assigned to subjects in relation to sovereign decision is clear. The result is a sort of a zero-sum relation: the more rights one has, the less power there is and vice versa. The entire modern philosophical-juridical debate is inscribed to varying degrees within this topological alternative that sees politics and law [*legge*], decision and the norm as situated on opposite poles of a dialectic that has as its object the relation between subjects [*sudditi*] and the sovereign.<sup>30</sup> Their respective weight depends on the prevalence that is periodically assigned to the two terms being compared. When, at the end of this tradition, Hans Kelsen and Carl Schmitt will argue (the one, normativism, armed against the other, decisionism), they do nothing but replicate the same topological contrast that from Bodin on, indeed in Bodin, seemed to oppose the versant of law to that of power.

It is in the breaking of this categorical frame that Foucault consciously works.<sup>31</sup> Resisting what he himself will define as a new form of knowledge (or better, a different order of discourse with that of all modern philosophical-political theories) doesn't mean, of course, erasing the figure or reducing the decisively objective role of the sovereign paradigm, but rather recognizing the real mechanism by which it functions. It isn't that of regulating relations between subjects or between them and power, but rather their subjugation *at the same time* to a specific juridical and political order. On the one side, rights will emerge as nothing other the instrument that the sovereign uses for imposing his own domination. Correspondingly, the sovereign can dominate only on the basis of the right that legitimates the whole operation. In this way, what appeared as split in an alternative bipolarity between law and power, legality and legitimacy, and norm and exception finds its unity in a same regime of sense. Yet this is nothing but the first effect of the reversal of perspective that Foucault undertakes, one that intersects with another effect relative to the line of division no longer internal to the categorical apparatus of the sovereign *dispositif*, but now immanent to the social body. This perspective claimed to unify it through the rhetorical procedure of polar oppositions. It is as if Foucault undertook the dual work of deconstructing or outflanking the modern narration, which, while suturing an apparent divergence, located a real distinction. It is precisely the recomposition of the duality between power and right, excavated by the sovereign paradigm that makes visible a conflict just as real that separates and opposes groups of diverse ethnicity in the predominance over a given territory. The presumed conflict between sovereignty and law is displaced by the far more real conflict between potential rivals who fight over the use of resources and their control because of their different racial makeup. This doesn't mean in any way that the mechanism of juridical legitimation fails, but rather than preceding and regulating the struggle under way, it constitutes the result and instrument used by those who now and again emerge as victorious. It isn't that the discourse of rights [*diritto*] determines war, but rather that war adopts the discourse of rights in order to consecrate the relation of forces that war itself defines.

Already this unearthing of the constitutive character of war—not its background or its limit, but instead its origin and form of politics—inaugurates an analytic horizon whose historical import we can only begin to see today. But the reference to the conflict between races, a topic to which Foucault dedicated his course in 1976 at the Collège de France, indicates

something else, which brings us directly to our underlying theme. That such a conflict concerns so-called populations from an ethnic point of view refers to an element that is destined to disrupt in a much more radical way the modern political and philosophical apparatus. I am referring to *bíos*, a life presupposed simultaneously in its general and specific dimension of biological fact. This is both the object and the subject of the conflict and therefore of the politics that it forms:

It seems to me that one of the basic phenomena of the nineteenth century was what might be called power's hold over life. What I mean is the acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being, that the biological came under State control, that there was at least a certain tendency that leads to what might be termed State control of the biological.<sup>32</sup>

This phrase that opens the lecture of March 17, 1976, and appears to be a new formulation, is in fact already the point of arrival of a trajectory of thought that was inaugurated at least a biennial before. That the first utilization of the term in Foucault's lexicon can be traced directly back to the conference in Rio in 1974, in which Foucault said that "for capitalist society it is the biopolitical that is important before everything else; the biological, the somatic, the corporeal. The body is a biopolitical reality; medicine is a biopolitical strategy" doesn't have much importance.<sup>33</sup> What counts is that all his texts from those years seem to converge in a theoretical step within which every discursive segment comes to assume a meaning that isn't completely perceptible if it is analyzed separately or outside of a biopolitical semantics.

Already in *Discipline and Punish*, the crisis of the classical model of sovereignty, which was represented by the decline of its deadly rituals, is marked by the emergence of a new disciplinary power, which is addressed rather to the life of the subjects that it invests.<sup>34</sup> Although capital punishment through the dismemberment of the convicted responds well to the individual's breaking of the contract (making him guilty of injuring the Majesty), from a certain moment every individual death now is assumed and interpreted in relation to a vital requirement of society in its totality. Yet it is in the course Foucault offered simultaneously titled *Abnormal* that the process of deconstruction of the sovereign paradigm in both its state-power declination and its juridical identity of subject culminates: the entrance and then the subtle colonization of medical knowledge in what was first the competence of law [*diritto*] establishes a true shift in regime, one that pivots no longer on the abstraction of juridical relations but on the taking on of life

in the same body of those who are its carriers.<sup>35</sup> In the moment in which the criminal act is no longer to be charged to the will of the subject, but rather to a psychopathological configuration, we enter into a zone of indistinction between law and medicine in whose depths we can make out a new rationality centered on the question of life—of its preservation, its development, and its management. Of course, we must not confuse levels of discourse: such a problematic was always at the center of sociopolitical dynamics, but it is only at a certain point that its centrality reaches a threshold of awareness. Modernity is the place more than the time of this transition and turning [*svolta*]. By this I mean that while, for a long period of time, the relation between politics and life is posed indirectly—which is to say mediated by a series of categories that are capable of distilling or facilitating it as a sort of clearinghouse—beginning at a certain point these partitions are broken and life enters directly into the mechanisms and *dispositifs* of governing human beings.

Without retracing the steps that articulate this process of the governmentalization of life in Foucauldian genealogy—from “pastoral power” to the reason of state to the expertise of the “police”—let’s keep our attention on the outcome: on the one side, all political practices that governments put into action (or even those practices that oppose them) turn to life, to its process, to its needs, and to its fractures. On the other side, life enters into power relations not only on the side of its critical thresholds or its pathological exceptions, but in all its extension, articulation, and duration. From this perspective, life everywhere exceeds the juridical constraints used to trap it. This doesn’t imply, as I already suggested, some kind of withdrawal or contraction of the field that is subjected to the law. Rather, it is the latter that is progressively transferred from the transcendental level of codes and sanctions that essentially have to do with subjects of will to the immanent level of rules and norms that are addressed instead to bodies: “these power mechanisms are, at least in part, those that, beginning in the eighteenth century, took charge of men’s existence, men as living bodies.”<sup>36</sup> It is the same premise of the biopolitical regime. More than a removal of life from the pressure that is exercised upon it by law, it is presented rather as delivering their relation to a dimension that both determines and exceeds them both. It is with regard to this meaning that the apparently contradictory expression needs to be understood according to which “it was life more than the law that became the issue of political struggles, even if the latter



were formulated through affirmations concerning rights.”<sup>37</sup> What is in question is no longer the distribution of power or its subordination to the law, nor the kind of regime nor the consensus that is obtained, but something that precedes it because it pertains to its “primary material.” Behind the declarations and the silences, the mediations and the conflicts that have characterized the dynamics of modernity—the dialectic that up until a certain stage we have named with the terms of liberty, equality, democracy (or, on the contrary, tyranny, force, and domination)—Foucault’s analysis uncovers in *bíos* the concrete power from which these terms originate and toward which they are directed.

Regarding such a conclusion, Foucault’s perspective would seem to be close to that of American biopolitics. Certainly, he too places life at the center of the frame and he too, as we have seen, does so polemically vis-à-vis the juridical subjectivism and humanistic historicism of modern political philosophy. But the *bíos* that he opposes to the discourse of rights and its effects on domination is also configured in terms of a historical semantics that is also symmetrically reversed with respect to the legitimating one of sovereign power. Nothing more than life—in the lines of development in which it is inscribed or in the vortexes in which it contracts—is touched, crossed, and modified in its innermost being by history. This was the lesson that Foucault drew from the Nietzschean genealogy, when he places it within a theoretical frame that substituted a search for the origin (or the prefiguration of the end) with that of a force field freed from the succession of events and conflict between bodies. Yet he also was influenced by Darwinian evolution, whose enduring actuality doesn’t reside in having substituted “the grand old biological metaphor of life and evolution” for history, but, on the contrary, in having recognized in life the marks, the intervals, and the risks of history.<sup>38</sup> It is precisely from Darwin, in fact, that the knowledge comes that “life evolved, that the evolution of the species is determined, by a certain degree, by accidents of a historical nature.”<sup>39</sup> And so it makes little sense to oppose a natural paradigm to a historical one within the frame of life, or locate in nature the hardened shell in which life is immobilized or loses its historical content. This is because, contrary to the underlying presupposition of Anglo-Saxon *biopolitics*, something like a definable and identifiable human nature doesn’t exist as such, independent from the meanings that culture and therefore history have, over the course of time, imprinted on it. And then because the same knowledges that have

thematized it contain within them a precise historical connotation outside of which their theoretical direction risks remaining indeterminate. Biology itself is born around the end of the eighteenth century, thanks to the appearance of new scientific categories that gave way to a concept of life that is radically different from what was in use before. “I would say,” Foucault will say in this regard, “that the notion of life is not a *scientific concept*; it has been an *epistemological indicator* of which the classifying, delimiting, and other functions had an effect on scientific discussions, and not on what they were talking about.”<sup>40</sup>

It is almost too obvious the shift (though one could also rightly say the reversal) that such an epistemological deconstruction impresses on the category of biopolitics. That it is always historically qualified according to a modality that Foucault defines with the term “biohistory” as anything but limited to its simple, natural casting implies a further step that to this point has been excluded from all the preceding interpretations. Biopolitics doesn’t refer only or most prevalently to the way in which politics is captured—limited, compressed, and determined—by life, but also and above all by the way in which politics grasps, challenges, and penetrates life:

If one can apply the term *bio-history* to the pressures through which the movements of life and processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.<sup>41</sup>

We can already glimpse in this formulation the radical novelty of the Foucauldian approach. What in the preceding declensions of biopolitics was presented as an unalterable given—nature or life, insofar as it is human—now becomes a problem; not a presupposition but a “site,” the product of a series of causes, forces, and tensions that themselves emerge as modified in an incessant game of action and reaction, of pushing and resisting. History and nature, life and politics cross, propel, and violate each other according to a rhythm that makes one simultaneously the matrix and the provisional outcome of the other. But it is also a sagittal gaze that deprives it of its presumed fullness, as well as of every presumption of mastery of the entire field of knowledge. Just as Foucault adopts the category of life so as to break apart the modern discourse of sovereignty and its laws from within, so too in turn does that of history remove from life the naturalistic flattening to which the American biopolitical exposes it:

It is history that designs these complexes [the genetic variations from which the various populations arise] before erasing them; there is no need to search for brute and definitive biological facts that from the depths of “nature” would impose themselves on history.<sup>42</sup>

It is as if the philosopher makes use of a conceptual instrument that is necessary for taking apart a given order of discourse in order to give it other meanings, at the moment in which it tends to assume a similarly pervasive behavior. Or additionally that it is separated from itself, having been placed in the interval in such a way as to be subject to the same effect of knowledge that it allows externally. From here we can see the continual movement, the rotation of perspective, along a margin that, rather than distinguishing concepts, dismantles and reassembles them in topologies that are irreducible to a monolinear logic. Life as such doesn't belong either to the order of nature or to that of history. It cannot be simply ontologized, nor completely historicized, but is inscribed in the moving margin of their intersection and their tension. The meaning of biopolitics is sought “in this dual position of life that placed it at the same time outside history, in its biological environment, and inside human historicity, penetrated by the latter's techniques of knowledge and power.”<sup>43</sup>

The complexity of Foucault's perspective, that is, of his biopolitical *cantiere*, doesn't end here. It doesn't only concern his own position, which is situated precisely between what he calls “the threshold of modernity,” on the limit in which modern knowledge folds upon itself, carried in this way outside itself.<sup>44</sup> Rather, it is also the effect of meaning that from an undecidable threshold communicates with the notion defined thusly: once the dialectic between politics and life is reconstructed in a form that is irreducible to every monocausal synthesis, what is the consequence that derives for each of the two terms and for their combination? And so we return to the question with which I opened this chapter on the ultimate meaning of biopolitics. What does biopolitics mean, what outcomes does it produce, and how is a world continually more governed by biopolitics configured? Certainly, we are concerned with a mechanism or a productive *dispositif*, from the moment that the reality that invests and encompasses it is not left unaltered. But productive of what? What is the *effect* of biopolitics? At this point Foucault's response seems to diverge in directions that involve two other notions that are implicated from the outset in the concept of *bios*, but which are situated on the extremes of its semantic extension: these are

*subjectivization* and *death*. With respect to life, both constitute more than two possibilities. They are at the same time life's form and its background, origin, and destination; in each case, however, according to a divergence that seems not to admit any mediation: it is either one or the other. Either biopolitics produces subjectivity or it produces death. Either it makes the subject its own object or it decisively objectifies it. Either it is a politics of life or a politics over life. Once again the category of biopolitics folds in upon itself without disclosing the solution to its own enigma.

### Politics of Life

In this interpretive divergence there is something that moves beyond the simple difficulty of definition, which touches the profound structure of the concept of biopolitics. It is as if it were traversed initially and indeed constituted by an interval of difference or a semantic layer that cuts and opens it into two elements that are not constituted reciprocally. Or that the elements are constituted only at the price of a certain violence that subjects one to the domination of the other, conditioning their superimposition to an obligatory positioning-under [*sotto-posizione*]. It is as if the two terms from which biopolitics is formed (life and politics) cannot be articulated except through a modality that simultaneously juxtaposes them. More than combining them or even arranging them along the same line of signification, they appear to be opposed in a long-lasting struggle, the stakes of which are for each the appropriation and the domination of the other. From here the never-released tension, that lacerating effect from which the notion of biopolitics never seems to be able to liberate itself because biopolitics produces the effect in the form of an alternative between the two that cannot be bypassed. Either life holds politics back, pinning it to its impassable natural limit, or, on the contrary, it is life that is captured and prey to a politics that strains to imprison its innovative potential. Between the two possibilities there is a breach in signification, a blind spot that risks dragging the entire category into vacuum of sense. It is as if biopolitics is missing something (an intermediary segment or a logical juncture) that is capable of unbinding the absoluteness of irreconcilable perspectives in the elaboration of a more complex paradigm that, without losing the specificity of its elements, seizes hold of the internal connection or indicates a common horizon.

Before attempting a definition, it is to be noted that not even Foucault is able to escape completely from such a deadlock, and this despite working in a profoundly new framework with respect to the preceding formula-

tions. Foucault too ends up reproducing the stalemate in the form of a further “indecisiveness” — no longer relative to the already acquired impact of power on life, but relative to its effects, measured along a moving line that, as was said, has at one head the production of new subjectivity and at the other its radical destruction. That these contrastive possibilities cohabit within the same analytic axis, the logical extremes of which they constitute, doesn’t detract from the fact that their different accentuations determine an oscillation in the entire discourse in opposite directions both from the interpretive and the stylistic point of view. Such a dyscrasia is recognizable in a series of logical gaps and of small lexical incongruences or of sudden changes in tonality, on which it is not possible to linger in detail here. When taken together, however, they mark a difficulty that is never overcome — or, more precisely, an underlying hesitation between two orientations that tempt Foucault equally. Yet he never decisively opts for one over the other. The most symptomatic indication of such an uncertainty is constituted by the definitions of the category, which he from time to time puts into play. Notwithstanding the significant distortions (owing to the different contexts in which they appear), the definitions are mostly expressed indirectly. This was already the case for perhaps Foucault’s most celebrated formulation, according to which “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.”<sup>45</sup> This is even more the case where the notion of biopolitics is derived from the contrast with the sovereign paradigm. In this case too a negative modality prevails: biopolitics is primarily that which is *not* sovereignty. More than having its own source of light, biopolitics is illuminated by the twilight of something that precedes it, by sovereignty’s advance into the shadows.

Nevertheless, it is precisely here in the articulation of the relation between the two regimes that the prospective splitting to which I gestured previously reappears, a split that is destined in this case to invest both the level of historical reconstruction and that of conceptual determination. How are sovereignty and biopolitics to be related? Chronologically or by a differing superimposition? It is said that one emerges out of the background of the other, but what are we to make of such a background? Is it the definitive withdrawal of a preceding presence, or rather is it the horizon that embraces and holds what newly emerges within it? And is such an emergence really new or is it already inadvertently installed in the categorical

framework that it will also modify? On this point too Foucault refuses to respond definitively. He continues to oscillate between the two opposing hypotheses without opting conclusively for either one or the other. Or better: he adopts both with that characteristic, optical effect of splitting or doubling that confers on his text the slight dizziness that simultaneously seduces and disorients the reader.

The steps in which discontinuity seems to prevail are at first sight univocal. Not only is biopolitics other than sovereignty, but between the two a clear and irreversible caesura passes. Foucault writes of that disciplinary power that constitutes the first segment of the *dispositif* that is truly biopolitical: “An important phenomenon occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the appearance—one should say the invention—of a *new* mechanism of power which had very specific procedures, completely *new* instruments, and *very different* equipment. It was, I believe, *absolutely incompatible* with relations of sovereignty.”<sup>46</sup> It is new because it turns most of all on the control of bodies and of that which they do, rather than on the appropriation of the earth and its products. From this side, the contrast appears frontally and without any nuances: “It seems to me that this type of power is the exact, point-for-point opposite of the mechanics of power that the theory of sovereignty described or tried to transcribe.”<sup>47</sup> For this reason, it “can therefore *no longer* be transcribed in terms of sovereignty.”<sup>48</sup>

What is it that makes biopolitics completely unassimilable to the sovereign? Foucault telescopes such a difference in a formula, justifiably famous for its synthetic efficacy, which appears at the end of *The History of Sexuality*: “One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death.”<sup>49</sup> The opposition couldn’t be any plainer: whereas in the sovereign regime life is nothing but the residue or the remainder left over, saved from the right of taking life, in biopolitics life encamps at the center of a scenario of which death constitutes the external limit or the necessary contour. Moreover, whereas in the first instance life is seen from the perspective opened by death, in the second death acquires importance only in the light radiated by life. But what precisely does affirming life mean? *To make* live, rather than limiting oneself to allowing to live? The internal articulations of the Foucauldian discourse are well known: the distinction—here too defined in terms of succession and a totality of copresence—between the disciplinary apparatus and *dispositifs* of control; the techniques put into action by power with regard first to individual bodies and then of populations as a whole; the

sectors—school, barracks, hospital, factory—in which they drill and the domains—birth, disease, mortality—that they affect. But to grasp in its complexity the affirmative semantics that—at least in this first declension of the Foucauldian lexicon—the new regime of power connotes, we need to turn again to the three categories of *subjectivization*, *making immanent*, and *production* that characterize it. Linked between them by the same orientation of sense, they are distinctly recognizable in three genealogical branches in which the biopolitical code is born and then develops, which is to say those that Foucault defines as the pastoral power, the art of government, and the police sciences.

The first alludes to that modality of government of men that in the Jewish-Christian tradition especially moves through a strict and one-to-one relation between shepherd and flock. Unlike the Greek or the Roman models, what counts is not so much the legitimacy of power fixed by law or the maintenance of the harmony between citizens, but the concern that the shepherd devotes to protecting his own flock. The relation between them is perfectly unique: as the sheep follow the will of him who leads them without hesitation, in the same way the shepherd takes care of the life of each of them, to the point, when necessary, of being able to risk his own life. But what connotes the pastoral practice even more is the mode in which such a result is realized: that of a capillary direction, that is both collective and individualized, of the bodies and souls of subjects. At the center of such a process is that durable *dispositif* constituted by the practice of confession on which Foucault confers a peculiar emphasis, precisely because it is the channel through which the process of subjectivization is produced of what remains the object of power.<sup>50</sup> Here for the first time the fundamental meaning of the complex figure of subjection is disclosed. Far from being reduced to a simple objectivization, confession refers rather to a movement that conditions the domination over the object to its subjective participation in the act of domination. Confessing—and in this way placing oneself in the hands of the authority of him who will apprehend and judge its truth—the object of pastoral power is subjugated to its own objectivization and is objectivized in the constitution of its subjectivity. The medium of this crisscrossing effect is the construction of the individual. Forcing him into exposing his subjective truth, controlling the most intimate sounds of his conscience, power singles out the one that it subjects as its own object, and so doing recognizes him as an individual awarded with a specific subjectivity:

It is a form of a power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.<sup>51</sup>

If the direction of the conscience by the pastors of souls opens the movement of the subjectivization of the object, the conduct of government, which was theorized and practiced in the form of the reason of state, translates and determines the progressive shift of power from the outside to within the confines of that on which it is exercised. Although the Machiavellian principle still preserves a relation of singularity and of transcendence with regard to its own principality, the art of governing induces a double movement of making immanent and pluralization. On the one side, power is no longer in circular relation with itself, which is to say to the preservation or the amplification of its own order, but in relation to the life of those that it governs, in the sense that its ultimate end is not simply that of obedience but also the welfare of the governed. Power, more than dominating men and territories from on high, adheres to their demands, inscribes its own operation in the processes that the governed establish, and draws forth its own force from that of the subjects [*sudditi*]. But to do so, that is, to collect and satisfy all the requests that arrive from the body of the population, power is forced into multiplying its own services for the areas that relate to subjects—from that of defense, to the economy, to that of public health. From here there is a double move that intersects: the first is a vertical sort that moves from the top toward the bottom, placing in continuous communication the sphere of the state with that of the population and families, reaching finally that of single individuals; the other the horizontal, which places in productive relation the practices and the languages of life in a form that amplifies the horizons, improves the services, and intensifies the performance. With respect to the inflection of sovereign power that is primarily negative, the difference is obvious. If sovereign power was exercised in terms of subtraction and extraction of goods, services, and blood from its own subjects, governmental power, on the contrary, is addressed to the subjects’ lives, not only in the sense of their defense, but also with regard to how to deploy, strengthen, and maximize life. Sovereign power removed, extracted, and finally destroyed. Governmental power reinforces, augments, and stimulates. With respect to the salvific tendency of the pastoral power, governmental power shifts decisively its attention onto the secular level of health, longevity, and wealth.



Yet in order that the genealogy of biopolitics can be manifested in all its breadth, a final step is missing. This is represented by the science of the police. Police science is not to be understood in any way as a specific technology within the apparatus of the state as we understand it today. It is rather the productive modality that its government assumes in all sectors of individual and collective experience—from justice, to finance, to work, to health care, to pleasure. More than avoiding harm [*mali*], the police need to produce goods [*beni*]. Here the process of the positive reconversion of the ancient sovereign right of death reaches its zenith. If the meaning of the term *Politik* remains the negative one of the defense from internal and external enemies, the semantics of *Polizei* is absolutely positive. It is ordered to favor life in all its magnitude, along its entire extension, through all its articulations. And, as Nicolas De Lamare wrote in his compendium, there is even more to be reckoned with. The police are given the task of doing what is necessary as well as what is opportune and pleasurable: “In short, life is the object of the police: the indispensable, the useful, and the superfluous. That people survive, live, and even do better than just that: this is what the police have to ensure.”<sup>52</sup> In his *Elements of Police*, Johann Heinrich Gottlob von Justi aims the lens even further ahead: if the object of the police is defined here too as “live individuals living in society,” a more ambitious understanding is that of creating a virtuous circle between the vital development of individuals and the strengthening of the forces of the state:<sup>53</sup>

[T]he police has to keep the citizens happy—happiness being understood as survival, life, and improved living . . . to develop those elements constitutive of individuals’ lives in such a way that their development also fosters the strength of the state.<sup>54</sup>

The affirmative character is already fully delineated above, those features (at least from this perspective) that Foucault seems to assign to biopolitics in contrast to the commanding tendency of the sovereign regime. In opposition to it, biopolitics does not limit or coerce [*violenta*] life, but expands it in a manner proportional to its development. More than two parallel flows, we ought to speak of a singular expansive process in which power and life constitute the two opposing and complementary faces. To strengthen itself, power is forced at the same time into strengthening the object on which it discharges itself; not only, but, as we saw, it is also forced to render it subject to its own subjugation [*assoggettamento*]. Moreover, if it wants to stimulate the action of subjects, power must not only presuppose but also produce

the conditions of freedom of the subjects to whom it addresses itself. But—and here Foucault’s discourse tends toward the maximum point of its own semantic extension—if we are free *for* power, we are also free *against* power. We are able not only to support power and increase it, but also to resist and oppose power. In fact, Foucault concludes that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”<sup>55</sup> This doesn’t mean, as Foucault quickly points out, that resistance is always already subjected to power against which it seems to be opposed, but rather that power needs a point of contrast against which it can measure itself in a dialectic that doesn’t have any definitive outcome. It is as if power, in order to reinforce itself, needs continually to divide itself and fight against itself, or to create a projection that pulls it where it wasn’t before. This line of fracture or protrusion is life itself. It is the place that is both the object and the subject of resistance. At the moment in which it is directly invested by power, life recoils against power, against the same striking force that gave rise to it:

Moreover, against this power that was still new in the nineteenth century, the forces that resisted relied for support on the very thing it invested, that is, on life and man as a living being . . . life as a political object was in a sense taken at face value and turned back against the system that was bent on controlling it.<sup>56</sup>

Simultaneously within and outside of power, life appears to dominate the entire scenario of existence; even when it is exposed to the pressure of power—and indeed, never more than in such a case—life seems capable of taking back what had deprived it before and of incorporating it into its infinite folds.

### Politics over Life

This, however, isn’t Foucault’s entire response, nor is it his only. Certainly, there is an internal coherence therein, as is testified by an entire interpretive line, which not only has made itself the standard-bearer of Foucault’s position, but which has pushed Foucault’s response well beyond his own manifest intentions.<sup>57</sup> Be that as it may, this doesn’t eliminate an impression of insufficiency, or indeed of an underlying reservation concerning a definitive outcome. It is as if Foucault himself wasn’t completely satisfied by his own historical-conceptual reconstruction or that he believed it to be only partial and incapable of exhausting the problem; indeed, it is bound

to leave unanswered a decisive question: if life is stronger than the power that besieges it, if its resistance doesn't allow it to bow to the pressure of power, then how do we account for the outcome obtained in modernity of the mass production of death?<sup>58</sup> How do we explain that the culmination of a politics of life generated a lethal power that contradicts the productive impulse? This is the paradox, the impassable stumbling block that not only twentieth-century totalitarianism, but also nuclear power asks philosophy with regard to a resolutely affirmative declension of biopolitics. How is it possible that a power of life is exercised against life itself? Why are we not dealing with two parallel processes or simply two simultaneous processes? Foucault accents the direct and proportional relation that runs between the development of biopower and the incremental growth in homicidal capacity. There have never been so many bloody and genocidal wars as have occurred in the last two centuries, which is to say in a completely biopolitical period. It is enough to recall that the maximum international effort for organizing health, the so-called Beveridge Plan, was elaborated in the middle of a war that produced 50 million dead: "One could symbolize such a coincidence by a slogan: Go get slaughtered and we promise you a long and pleasant life. Life insurance is connected with a death command."<sup>59</sup> Why? Why does a power that functions by insuring, protecting, and augmenting life express such a potential for death? It is true that wars and mass destruction are no longer perpetrated in the name of a politics of power [*potenza*]—at least according to the declared intentions of those who conduct these wars—but in the name of the survival itself of populations that are involved. But it is precisely what reinforces the tragic aporia of a death that is necessary to preserve life, of a life nourished by the deaths of others, and finally, as in the case of Nazism, by its own death.<sup>60</sup>

Once again we are faced with that enigma, that terrible unsaid, that the "bio" placed before politics holds for the term's meaning. Why does biopolitics continually threaten to be reversed into thanatopolitics? Here too the response to such an interrogative seems to reside in the problematic point of intersection between sovereignty and biopolitics. But seen now from an angle of refraction that bars an interpretation linearly in opposition to the two types of regime. The Foucauldian text marks a passage to a different representation of their relation by the slight but meaningful semantic slip between the verb "to substitute" (which still connotes discontinuity) and the verb "to complement," which alludes differently to a process of progressive and continuous mutation:

And I think that one of the greatest transformations that the political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that, I wouldn't say exactly that sovereignty's old right—to take life or let live—was *replaced*, but it came to be *complemented* by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it.<sup>61</sup>

It isn't that Foucault softens the typological distinction as well as the opposition between the two kinds of power: these are defined as they were previously. It is only that, rather than deploying the distinction along a single sliding line, he returns it to a logic of copresence. From this point of view, the same steps that were read before in a discontinuous key now appear to be articulated according to a different argumentative strategy:

This power cannot be described or justified in terms of the theory of sovereignty. It is radically heterogeneous and should logically have led to the complete disappearance of the great juridical edifice of the theory of sovereignty. In fact, the theory of sovereignty not only continued to exist as, if you like, an ideology of right; it also continued to organize the juridical codes that nineteenth-century Europe adopted after the Napoleonic codes.<sup>62</sup>

Foucault furnishes an initial explanation of the ideological-functional kind vis-à-vis such a persistence, in the sense that the use of the theory of the sovereign, once it has been transferred from the monarch to the people, would have allowed both a concealment and a juridicization of the *dispositifs* of control put into action by biopower. From here the institution of a double level that is intertwined between an effective practice of the biological kind and a formal representation of juridical character. Contractualist philosophies would have constituted from this point of view the natural terrain of contact between the old sovereign order and the new governmental apparatus, applied this time not only to the individual sphere, but also to the area of population in its totality. And yet, this reconstruction, insofar as it is plausible on the historical level, doesn't completely answer the question on the theoretical level. It is as if between the two models, sovereignty and biopolitics, there passes a relation at once more secret and essential, one that is irreducible both to the category of analogy and to that of contiguity. What Foucault seems to refer to is rather a copresence of opposing vectors superimposed in a threshold of originary indistinction that makes one both the ground and the projection, the truth and the surplus of the other. It is this antinomic crossing, this aporetic knot, that prevents us from interpreting the association of sovereignty and biopolitics in a monolinear form or in the sense of contemporaneity or succession. Nei-

ther the one nor the other restores the complexity of an association that is much more antithetical. In their mutual relation, different times are compressed within a singular epochal segment constituted and simultaneously altered by their reciprocal tension. Just as the sovereign model incorporates the ancient pastoral power—the first genealogical incunabulum of biopower—so too biopolitics carries within it the sharp blade of a sovereign power that both crosses and surpasses it. If we consider the Nazi state, we can say indifferently, as Foucault himself does, that it was the old sovereign power that adopts biological racism for itself, a racism born in opposition to it. Or, on the contrary, that it is the new biopolitical power that made use of the sovereign right of death in order to give life to state racism. If we have recourse to the first interpretive model, biopolitics becomes an internal articulation of sovereignty; if we privilege the second, sovereignty is reduced to a formal schema of biopolitics. The antinomy emerges more strongly with regard to nuclear equilibrium. Do we need to look at it from the perspective of life that, notwithstanding everything, has been able to ensure it or from the perspective of total and mass death that continues to threaten us?

So the power that is being exercised in this atomic power is exercised in such a way that it is capable of suppressing life itself. And, therefore, to suppress itself insofar as it is the power that guarantees life. Either it is sovereign and uses the atomic bomb, and therefore cannot be power, biopower, or the power to guarantee life, as it has been ever since the nineteenth century. Or, at the opposite extreme, you no longer have a sovereign right that is in excess of biopower, but a biopower that is in excess of sovereign right.<sup>63</sup>

Once again, after having defined the terms of an alternating hermeneutic between two opposing theses, Foucault never opts decisively for one or the other. On the one hand, he hypothesizes something like a return to the sovereign paradigm within a biopolitical horizon. In that case, we would be dealing with a literally phantasmal event, in the technical sense of a reappearance of death—of the destitute sovereign decapitated by the grand revolution—on the scene of life; as if a tear suddenly opened in the reign of immunization (which is precisely that of biopolitics), from which the blade of transcendence once again vibrates, the ancient sovereign power of taking life. On the other hand, Foucault introduces the opposing hypothesis, which says that it was precisely the final disappearance of the sovereign paradigm that liberates a vital force so dense as to overflow and be turned against itself. With the balancing constituted by sovereign power

diminished in its double orientation of absolute power and individual rights, life would become the sole field in which power that was otherwise defeated is exercised:

The excess of biopower appears when it becomes technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage life but to make it proliferate, to create living matter, to build the monster, and ultimately, to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive. This formidable extension of biopower, unlike what I was just saying about atomic power, will put it beyond all human sovereignty.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps we have arrived at the point of maximum tension, as well as at the point of potential internal fracture of the Foucauldian discourse. At the center remains the relation (not only historical, but conceptual and theoretical) between sovereignty and politics, or more generally between modernity and what precedes it, between present and past. Is that past truly past or does it extend as a shadow that reaches up to the present until it covers it entirely? In this irresolution there is something more than a simple exchange between a topological approach of the horizontal sort and another, more epochal, of the vertical kind; or we are dealing with both a retrospective and a prospective gaze.<sup>65</sup> There is indecision concerning the underlying meaning of secularization. Is it nothing other than the channel, the secret passage through which death has returned to capture “life” again? Or, on the contrary, was it precisely the absolute disappearance of death, its conclusive death without remainder that sparks in the living a lethal battle against itself? Once again, how do we wish to think the sovereign paradigm within the biopolitical order, and then what does it represent? Is it a residue that is delayed in consuming itself, a spark that doesn’t go out, a compensatory ideology or the ultimate truth, because it is prior to and originary of its own installation, its own profound subsurface, its own underlying structure? And when it pushes with greater force so as to resurface (or, on the contrary, when it ultimately collapses), does death rise again in the heart of life until it makes it burst open?

What remains suspended here isn’t only the question of the relation of modernity with its “pre,” but also that of the relation with its “post.” What was twentieth-century totalitarianism with respect to the society that preceded it? Was it a limit point, a tear, a surplus in which the mechanism of biopower broke free, got out of hand, or, on the contrary, was it society’s sole and natural outcome? Did it interrupt or did it fulfill it? Once again the problem concerns the relation with the sovereign paradigm: does

Nazism (but also true [*reale*] communism) stand on the outside or inside vis-à-vis it? Do they mark the end or the return? Do they reveal the most intimate linking or the ultimate disjunction between sovereignty and biopolitics? It isn't surprising that Foucault's response is split into lines of argument that are substantially at odds with each other. Totalitarianism and modernity are at the same time continuous and discontinuous, not assimilable and indistinguishable:

One of the numerous reasons why [fascism and Stalinism] are, for us, so puzzling is that in spite of their historical weakness they are not quite original. They used and extended mechanisms already present in most other societies. More than that: in spite of their internal madness, they used to a large extent the ideas and the devices of our political rationality.<sup>66</sup>

The reason Foucault is prevented from responding less paradoxically is clear: if the thesis of indistinction between sovereignty, biopolitics, and totalitarianism were to prevail—the continuist hypothesis—he would be forced to assume genocide as the constitutive paradigm (or at least as the inevitable outcome) of the entire parabola of modernity.<sup>67</sup> Doing so would contrast with his sense of historical distinctions, which is always keen. If instead the hypothesis of difference were to prevail—the discontinuist hypothesis—his conception of biopower would be invalidated every time that death is projected inside the circle of life, not only during the first half of the 1900s, but also after. If totalitarianism were the result of what came before it, power would always have to enclose and keep watch over life relentlessly. If it were the temporary and contingent displacement, it would mean that life over time is capable of beating back every power that wants to violate it. In the first case, biopolitics would be an absolute power over life; in the second, an absolute power of life. Held between these two opposing possibilities and blocked in the aporia that is established when they intersect, Foucault continues to run simultaneously in both directions. He doesn't cut the knot, and the result is to keep his ingenious intuitions unfinished on the link between politics and life.

Evidently, Foucault's difficulty and his indecision move well beyond a simple question of historical periodization or genealogical articulation between the paradigms of sovereignty and biopolitics to invest the same logical and semantic configuration of the latter. My impression is that such a hermeneutic impasse is connected to the fact that, notwithstanding the theorization of their reciprocal implication, or perhaps because of this, the two terms of life and politics are to be thought as originally distinct

and only later joined in a manner that is still extraneous to them. It is precisely for this reason that politics and life remain indefinite in profile and in qualification. What, precisely, are “politics” and “life” for Foucault? How are they to be understood and in what way does their definition reflect on their relationship? Or, on the contrary, how does their relation impact on their respective definitions? If one begins to think them separately in their absoluteness, it becomes difficult and even contradictory to condense them in a single concept. Not only, but one risks blocking a more profound understanding, relating precisely to the originary and elemental character of that association. It has sometimes been said that Foucault, absorbed for the most part in the question of power, never sufficiently articulated the concept of politics—to the point of substantially superimposing the expressions of “biopower” and “biopolitics.” But an analogous observation—a conceptual elaboration that is lacking or insufficient—could be raised as well in relation to the other term of the relation, which is to say that of life; that despite describing the term analytically in its historical-institutional, economic, social, and productive nervation, life remains, nevertheless, little problematized with regard to its epistemological constitution. What is life in its essence and even before that, does life have an essence—a recognizable and describable designation outside of the relation with other lives and with what is not life? Does there exist a simple life—a bare life—or does it emerge from the beginning as formed, as put into form by something that pushes it beyond itself? From this perspective as well, the category of biopolitics seems to demand a new horizon of meaning, a different interpretive key that is capable of linking the two polarities together in a way that is at the same time more limited and more complex.