From Biopower to Biopolitics

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1. Michel Foucault, through the concept of biopolitics, was already pointing out in the seventies what, nowadays, is well on its way to being obvious: "life" and "living being" [*le vivant*] are at the heart of new political battles and new economic strategies. He also demonstrated that the "introduction of life into history" corresponds with the rise of capitalism. In effect, from the 18th Century onwards the *dispositifs*[2] of power and *knowledge* begin to take into account the "processes of life" and the possibility of controlling and modifying them. "Western man gradually learns what it means to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that could be modified..." (Foucault 1984: 264). That life and living being, that the species and its productive requirements have moved to the heart of political struggle is something that is radically new in human history. "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."(Ibid. 265)

The patenting of the human genome and the development of artificial intelligence; biotechnology and the harnessing of life's forces for work, trace a new cartography of biopowers. These strategies put in question the forms of life itself. The works of Michel Foucault, however, focus only indirectly upon the description of these new biopowers. If power seizes life as the object of its exercise then Foucault is interested in determining what there is in life that resists, and that, in resisting this power, creates forms of subjectification and forms of life that escape its control. It seems to me that the common theme traversing all of Foucault's thought is the attempt to specify the requirements of

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2 Trans. Note: Foucault's term, *dispositif*, generally denotes a device or a mechanism, but it is also used to refer to the projected implementation of particular measures, to plans: technical plans, military plans, etc. The term is derived from the French verb *disposer*: to arrange, to set, to lay out. I have chosen to leave *dispositif* in French since there is no single term in English that can bear the full range of its meaning. The term will appear in italics throughout the text, the italics are mine. All the notes are by the original author unless stated otherwise.

a new "process of political creativity that the great political institutions and parties confiscated after the 19th Century." In effect, Foucault interprets the introduction of "life into history" constructively because it presents the opportunity to propose a new ontology, one that begins with the body and its potential, that regards the "political subject as an ethical one" against the prevailing tradition of Western thought which understands it as a "subject of law."

Rather than starting from a theory of obedience and its legitimating forms, its *dispositifs* and practices, Foucault interrogates power beginning with the "freedom" and the "capacity for transformation" that every "exercise of power" implies. The new ontology sanctioned by the introduction of "life into history" enables Foucault to "defend the subject's freedom" to establish relationships with himself and with others, relationships that are, for him, the very stuff [*matière*] of ethics." Habermas and the philosophers of the Constitutional State are not wrong in taking Foucault's thought as their privileged target because it represents a radical alternative to a transcendental ethics of communication and the rights of man.

2. Giorgio Agamben, recently, in a book inscribed explicitly within the research being undertaken on the concept of biopolitics, insisted that the theoretical and political distinction established in antiquity between *zoe* and *bios*, between natural life and political life, between man as a *living being* [*simple vivant*] whose sphere of influence is in the home and man as a *political subject* whose sphere of influence is in the polis, is "now nearly unknown to us." The introduction of the *zoe* into the sphere of the *polis* is, for both Agamben and Foucault, the decisive event of modernity; it marks a radical transformation of the political and philosophical categories of classical thought. But is this impossibility of distinguishing between *zoe* and *bios*, between man as a *living being* and man as a *political subject*, the product of the action of sovereign power or the result of the action of new forces over which power has "no control?" Agamben's response is very ambiguous and it oscillates continuously between these two alternatives. Foucault's response is entirely different: biopolitics is the form of government taken by a *new dynamic of forces* that, in conjunction, express power relations that the classical world could not have known.

Foucault described this dynamic, in keeping with the progress of his research, as the emergence of *a multiple and heterogeneous power of resistance and creation* that calls every organization that is transcendental, and every regulatory mechanism that is extraneous, to its constitution radically into question. The birth of biopower and the redefinition of the problem of sover-

eignty are only comprehensible to us on this basis. Foucault's entire work leads toward this conclusion even if he did not coherently explain the dynamic of this power, founded on the "freedom" of "subjects" and their capacity to act upon the "conduct of others," until the end of his life.

Foucault analyzed the introduction of "life into history" through the development of political economy. He demonstrated how the techniques of power changed at the precise moment that *economy* (strictly speaking, the government of the family) and *politics* (strictly speaking, the government of the polis) became imbricated with one another. The new biopolitical *dispositifs* are born once we begin to ask ourselves, "What is the correct manner of managing individuals, goods and wealth within the family (which a good father is expected to do in relation to his wife, children and servants) and of making the family fortunes prosper-how are we to introduce this meticulous attention of the father towards his family into the management of the State?"(Foucault 1991: 92).

Why should we look for the "arcana imperii" of modernity within political economy? Biopolitics, understood as a government-population political economy relationship, refers to a dynamic of forces that establishes a new relationship between ontology and politics. The political economy that Foucault talks about is neither the political economy of capital and work of classical economists, nor the Marxist economic critique of "living labor." It is a political economy of forces that is very close yet very distant from either of these points of view. It is very close to Marx's viewpoint because the problem of how to coordinate and command the relationships between men, insofar as they are living beings, and those of men with "things"[3] keeping the aim of extracting a "surplus of power" in mind, is not simply an economic problem but an ontological one. It is very distant because Foucault faulted Marx and political economy with reducing the relations between forces to relations between capital and labor, with making these binary and symmetric relations the source of all social dynamics and every power relation. The political economy that

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3 Trans. Note: Foucault claims that in the 17th Century there is the beginning of a shift away from juridical sovereignty towards what he calls the *art of government*. This movement away from sovereign power and into the "science of government" is characterized by the "introduction of economy into political practice," in short, by the government, *the disposition*, of things." Foucault explains; "One governs things. But what does this mean? I do not think that this is a matter of opposing things to men, but rather of showing that what government has to do with is not territory but rather a sort of complex of things and men. The things which in this sense government is to be concerned with are in fact men, but men in their relations with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, irrigation, fertility, etc.; men in their relation to that other kind of things, customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, etc.; lastly, men in their relation to that other kind of things, accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, etc." See: M. Foucault. 1991. Governmentality, in Burchell, Gordon and Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 93.

Foucault talks about, on the contrary, governs "the whole of a complex material field where not only are natural resources, the products of labor, their circulation and the scope of commerce engaged, but where the management of towns and routes, the conditions of life (habitat, diet, etc.), the number of inhabitants, their life span, their ability and fitness for work also come into play" (Foucault 1980a).

Political economy, as a syntagm of biopolitics, encompasses power *dispositifs* that amplify the whole range of relations between the forces that extend throughout the *social body* rather than, as in classical political economy and its critique, the relationship between *capital and labor* exclusively.

Foucault needs a new political theory and a new ontology to describe the new power relations expressed in the political economy of forces. In effect, biopolitics are "grafted" and "anchored" upon a multiplicity of disciplinary [*de commandemant et d'obéissance*] relations between forces, those which power "coordinates, institutionalizes, stratifies and targets," but that are not purely and simply projected upon individuals. The fundamental political problem of modernity is not that of a single source of sovereign power, but that of a multitude of forces that act and react amongst each other according to relations of command and obedience. The relations between man and woman, master and student, doctor and patient, employer and worker, that Foucault uses to illustrate the dynamics of the social body are *relations between forces that always involve a power relation*. If power, in keeping with this description, is constituted from below, then we need an ascending analysis of the constitution of power *dispositifs*, one that begins with infinitesimal mechanisms that are subsequently "invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed and institutionalized by ever more general mechanisms, and by forms of global domination."

Consequently, biopolitics is the strategic coordination of these power relations in order to extract a surplus of power from living beings. Biopolitics is a strategic relation; it is not the pure and simple capacity to legislate or legitimize sovereignty. According to Foucault the biopolitical functions of "coordination and determination" concede that biopower, from the moment it begins to operate in this particular manner, is not the true source of power. Biopower coordinates and targets a power that does not properly belong to it, that comes from the "outside." *Biopower is always born of something other than itself*.

3. Historically, the socialization of the forces that political economy attempts to govern calls sovereign power into crisis; these forces compel the biopolitical technologies of government into an "immanence," one that grows

increasingly extensive, with "society." This socialization always forces power to unfold in *dispositifs* that are both "complementary" and "incompatible," that express an "immanent transcendence in our actuality," that is to say, an integration of biopower and sovereign power. In effect, the emergence of the interdependent [solidaire] art of government-population-wealth series radically displaces the problem of sovereignty. Foucault does not neglect the analysis of sovereignty, he merely asserts that the grounding force will not be found on the side of power, since power is "blind and weak"[4] but on the side of the forces that constitute the "social body" or "society". Sovereign power is blind and weak but that does not signify, by any means, that it lacks efficacy: its impotence is ontological. We do a disservice to Foucault's thought when we describe its course through the analysis of power relations as a simple succession and substitution of different *dispositifs*, because the biopolitical *dispositif* does not replace sovereignty, it displaces its function and renders the "problem of its foundation even more acute."

"Accordingly, we need to see things not in terms of the replacement a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society of by a society of government; in reality one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has the population as its primary target" (Foucault 1991: 102). It would be better to try to think through the articulation and distribution of the different *dispositifs* that are present simultaneously in the linkage of government, population and political economy.

Can we then understand the development of biopolitics as the necessity to assure an immanent and strategic coordination of forces, rather than as the organization of a unilateral power relation? What we need to emphasize is the difference of the principles and the dynamics that regulate the socialization of forces, sovereign power and biopower. The relations between the latter two are only comprehensible on the basis of the multiple and heterogeneous action of forces. Without the introduction of the "freedom" and the resistance of forces the *dispositifs* of modern power remain incomprehensible, and their intelligibility will be inexorably reduced to the logic of political science. Foucault explains the issue in the following manner: "So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the other forces of the process; power relations

4 "Power is not omnipotent or omniscient--quite the contrary! If power relationships have produced forms of investigation, of analysis, of models of knowledge, etc., it is precisely not because power was omniscient, but because it was blind...If it is true that so many power relationships have been developed, so many systems of control, so many forms of surveillance, it is precisely because power was always impotent." M. Foucault, 'Clarifications on the Question of Power', in S. Lotringer ed., *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews*, 1961- 1984 (New York: Semiotexte, 1996), p. 625

are obliged to change to change with the resistance. So I think that *resistanc*e is the main word, *the keyword*, in this dynamic" (Foucault 1997a: 167).

4. In the seventies Foucault essentially formulates this new conception of power by means of the models of battle and war. In this way of understanding power and social relations there really is a "freedom" (an autonomy and an independence) of the forces in play, but it is rather a freedom that is constituted as the "power to deprive others." In effect, in war there are the strong and the weak, the clever and the naive, the victorious and the vanquished, and they are all acting "subjects," they are "free" even if this freedom only consists of the appropriation, the conquest and the submission of other forces.

Foucault, who made this model of power, a "warlike clash of forces," work against the philosophico-juridical tradition of contract and sovereignty, is firmly entrenched within a paradigm where the articulation of the concepts of the *power, difference and freedom* of forces already serves to explain social relations. Yet this "philosophy" of difference risks understanding all the relationships between men, regardless of the actual nature of these relationships, as relations of domination. Foucault's thought will be forced to confront this impasse. Nonetheless, bodies are not always trapped in the *dispositifs* of power. Power is not a unilateral relation, a totalitarian domination over individuals, such as the one exercised by the *dispositif* of the Panopticon[5], but a strategic relation. Every force in society exercises power and that power passes through the body, not because power is "omnipotent and omniscient" but because every force is a power of the body. Power comes from below; the forces that constitute it are multiple and heterogeneous. What we call power is an integration, a coordination and determination of the relations between a multiplicity of forces. How are we to liberate this new conception of power, one based upon the potential, difference and autonomy of forces, from the model of "universal domination?" How are we to call forth a "freedom" and a force that is not merely one of domination and resistance?

In response to this questioning Foucault moved from the model of war to that of "government." The thematic of government was already present in Foucault's reflection since it illustrated the biopolitical exercise of power. The displacement that Foucault enacts, sometime in the eighties, consists in considering the "art of governance" not merely as a strategy of power, even if it is biopolitical power, but as the *action of subjects upon others and upon themselves*. He searched amongst the ancients for the answer to this question: how

do *subjects become active*, how is the government of the self and others open to subjectifications that are independent of the biopolitical art of government? Consequently, The "government of souls" is always at stake in political struggle and cannot be formulated, exclusively, as biopower's modality of action.

The passage into ethics is an internal necessity to the foucauldian analysis of power. Gilles Deleuze is right in pointing out that there is a single Foucault, not two; the Foucault of the analysis of power and the Foucault of the problematic of the subject. A persistent questioning ranges the whole of Foucault's work: how are we to seize these infinitesimal, diffused and heterogeneous power relations so that they do not always result in phenomena of domination or resistance (Delezue 1986)? How can this new ontology of forces open up to unexpected processes of political constitution and independent processes of subjectification?

5. In the eighties, after a long detour through ethics, Foucault finally returned to his concept of "power." In his last interviews Foucault criticized himself because he thought that "like many others, he had not been clear enough and had not used the proper terms to speak of power." He saw his work retrospectively as an analysis and a history of the different modalities through which human beings are constituted as subjects in Western culture, rather than as an analysis of the transformations of the *dispositifs* of power. "Therefore it is not power, but the subject, that constitutes the general theme of my investigations"(Foucault 1980b). The analysis of power *dispositifs* should then begin, without any ambiguity, with the dynamic of forces and the "freedom" of subjects, and not with the dynamics of institutions, even if they are biopolitical institutions, because if one starts to pose the question of power starting from the institution one will inevitably end up with a theory of the "subject of law." In this last and definitive theory of "power" Foucault distinguishes three different concepts which are usually confused within a single category: *strategic relations, techniques of government and states of domination*.

He asserts that, above all, it is necessary to speak of power relations rather than power alone, because the emphasis should fall upon the relation itself rather than on its terms, the latter are not causes but mere effects. His characterization of strategic relations as a play of "infinitesimal, mobile, reversible and unstable" power is already in place in the seventies. The new modality that expresses the exercise of power at the interior of relationships, amorous, teacher and student relations, husband and a wife, children and parents, etc., is already found in the nietzschean concept of "forces" that was the precursor to Foucault's conception of "strategic relations." This modality, defined as an

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5 Foucault, responding to "Marxist" critiques launched against him by the actual mayor of Venice, Massimo Cacciari, explained that his conception of power relations could not be "merely reduced to such a figure.

"action upon an action," spreads through the will to "control the conduct of others."

"It seems to me that we must distinguish between power relations understood as strategic games between liberties--in which some try to control the conduct of others, who in turn try to avoid allowing their conduct be controlled or try to control the conduct of others--and the states of domination that people ordinarily call power" (Foucault 1997b: 299). Power is defined, from this perspective, as the capacity to structure the field of action of the other, to intervene in the domain of the other's possible actions. This new conception of power shows what was implicit in the model of the battle and war, but that still had not been coherently explained, namely, that it is necessary to presuppose the virtual "freedom" of the forces engaged to understand the exercise of power. Power is a mode of action upon "acting subjects," upon "free subjects, insofar as they are free."

"A power relationship, on the other hand, can only be articulated on the basis of two elements that are indispensable if it is really to be a power relation; that the "other" (the one over whom power is exercised) must be recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, effects and possible inventions may open up" (Foucault 2000)[6]. The only way that subjects can be said to be free, in keeping with he stipulations of this model, is if they "always have the possibility to change the situation, if this possibility always exists." This modality of the exercise of power allows Foucault to respond to the critiques addressed to him ever since he initiated his work on power: "So what I've said does not mean that we are always trapped, but that we are always free--well, anyway, that there is always the possibility of changing" (Foucault 1997a: 167).

"States of domination," on the contrary, are characterized by the institutional stabilization of strategic relations, by the fact that the mobility, the potential reversibility and instability of power relations, of "actions upon actions," is limited. The asymmetric relations within every social relation crystallize and lose the freedom, the "fluidity" and the "reversibility" of strategic relations. Foucault places "governmental technologies," that is to say, the set of practices that "constitute, define, organize and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" (Ibid. 300) between strategic relations and states of domination.

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6 The relation between the master and his slave is a power relation when flight is a possibility for the latter, otherwise it is simply a matter of the exercise of physical force.

For Foucault, Governmental technologies play a central role in power relations, because it is through these technologies that the opening and closing of strategic games is possible; through their exercise strategic relations become either crystallized and fixed in asymmetric institutionalized relations (states of domination), or they open up to the creation of subjectivities that escape biopolitical power in fluid and reversible relations. The ethico-political struggle takes on its full meaning at the frontier between "strategic relations" and "states of domination," on the terrain of "governmental technologies." Ethical action, then, is concentrated upon the crux of the relation between strategic relations and governmental technologies, and it has two principal goals: 1. to permit, by providing rules and techniques to manage the relationships established with the self and with others, the interplay of strategic relations with the minimum possible domination[7], 2. to augment their freedom, their mobility and reversibility in the exercise of power because these are the prerequisites of resistance and creation.

6. The determination of the relationship between resistance and creation is the last limit that Foucault's thought attempted to breach. The forces that resist and create are to be found in strategic relations and in the will of subjects who are virtually free to "control the conduct of others." Power, the condensation of strategic relations into relations of domination, the contraction of the spaces of freedom by the desire to control the conduct of others, always meets with resistance; this resistance should be sought out in the strategic dynamic. Consequently, life and living being become a "matter" of ethics through the dynamic that simultaneously resists power and creates new forms of life. In an interview in 1984, a year before his death, Foucault was asked about the definition of the relation between resistance and creation:

"Resistance was conceptualized only in terms of negation. Nevertheless, as you see it, resistance is not solely a negation but a creative process. To create and recreate, to transform the situation, to participate actively in the process, that is to resist."

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7 In the last part of his life Foucault constantly faced the problem of strategic relations: how is one to render them symmetrical? He only begins to tackle this thematic through the theme of "friendship." Gabriel Tarde, an author whose thought I had, previously, confronted with Foucault's, emphasizes the need, beginning from the same foucauldian "strategic relations," to base their dynamic upon sympathy and not merely on asymmetry. "A prominent sociologist recently defined social relations, in a way that is so narrow and far removed from the truth, by claiming that the principal characteristic of social acts is that they are imposed *from the outside, by obligation*. To make this claim is to recognize as social relations only those between the master and the slave, between the professor and the student or between the parents and their children, without any regard for the fact that free relations between equals exist. One has to have one's eyes shut not to see that, even in the schools, the education that the students acquire on their own, by imitating each other, by breathing in, so to speak, their examples or even those of their professors, the education that they *internalize*, has more importance than the one they receive or are forced to bear." See: G. Tarde, *La Logique Social*. Paris: Institut Synthelabo, 1999. p. 62

"Yes, that is the way I would put it. To say no is the minimum form of resistance. But naturally, at times that is very important. You have to say no as a decisive form of resistance" (Foucault 1997a: 168).

And in the same interview, destined to appear in *Body Politic*, Foucault asserts that minorities (homosexuals), to whom the relation between resistance and creation is a matter of political survival, should not only defend themselves and resist, but should also affirm themselves, create new forms of life, create a culture; "They should affirm themselves; not merely affirm themselves in their identity, but affirm themselves insofar as they are a creative force" (Ibid. 164).

The relationships with ourselves, the relationships that we should entertain with ourselves, which led Foucault to this new definition of power are not relationships of identity; "Rather they should be relationships of differentiation, of creation and innovation" (Ibid. 166). Foucault's work ought to be continued upon this fractured line between resistance and creation. Foucault's itinerary allows us to conceive the reversal of biopower into biopolitics, the "art of governance" into the production and government of new forms of life. To establish a conceptual and political distinction between biopower and biopolitics is to move in step with Foucault's thinking.

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