

# "Changing Life? Fortunes and Misfortunes of "Biopolitics" in the Age of Covid-19"

Isabelle Garo

**Abstract:** The ongoing pandemic seems to have dramatically affirmed the relevance of the notion of biopolitics and the subject of life more broadly. The notion was, however, developed by Michel Foucault in a very different social and political context from that of ours. After investigating the background and implications of his analysis, this article focuses on Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito's reappropriation of biopolitics and the metaphysical turn that they brought about. Besides these approaches, the notions of bio-economy and bio-capitalism open up new pathways that are more attentive to today's economic and social realities. Within the light of these questions and Agamben's and Esposito's theoretical elaborations, Marxist approaches to metabolism and social reproduction apprehend the question of life in an decisive way, directly connected to the will to construct an alternative to the form of Disaster Capitalism that currently menaces nature and humanity.

**Keywords:** Biopolitics, Biocapitalism, Social Reproduction, Marxism, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito

## **The proliferation of a concept**

The COVID-19 pandemic that took off in 2019 constitutes a total event because it incarnated, on an unprecedented and global scale, the interwovenness of all ongoing crises and the absence of any foreseeable way out of the catastrophic outburst that we're witnessing. Demanding analysis and inviting us to think about ruptures in a time that had banished them from the horizon, the situation has, among other collateral effects, provoked the accelerated proliferation of the subject of biopolitics, which has been developing in contemporary critical thought over the last decade. The causes of this success are multiple: its erudite as much as its suggestive character, its indefinite expansions and its futurist connotations, its critical fragrance, and Foucauldian ascendancy having become true radicalism's criteria, the term seems to be the most adequate, if not to analyse the causes of the current situation, at least to announce the scope of the stakes.

Indeed, the term biopolitics has every advantage to evoke, by itself, a number of growing trends that all have to do with life in direct connection with, or not, the question of epidemiology: the increase of zoonoses (a pathogen that goes from non-human to human), the large scale effects of agro-industry, the transformations of medicine and the joint comeback of bioethics and law, progress made in genetics and genomics, the role of the pharmaceutical industry, the commodification and patenting of the living, the boom in bio-technology, the rise of post-humanist questions, the ideological turn of neuroscience, the power of pro-life, survivalist, and other reactionary movements, everything against a backdrop of environmental urgency and a major economic crisis.

Yet, far from being an established concept within a precise analytical framework, the umbrella term “biopolitics” is suggestive of, without defining all combinations imaginable of politics and life, notions that are in themselves highly polysemous: life or the life sciences as politics, politics as life, life as an object of politics, etc.

The paradox is at its peak when adding that the notions of biopolitics and biopower were developed by Foucault in the mid-70s,<sup>1</sup> and remained incompletely developed by Foucault. Before abandoning them, he continuously remoulded them, giving them the status of a starting point, a sketch, for a theory of society and state that above all saw itself as an alternative to Marxist critiques of political economy and its political consequences. Dismissing the questions of the organisation of production and class conflict, abandoning the prospect of equality and revolution, Foucault approaches political and social reality from the combined perspective of procedures of subjectivation and apparatuses of governmentality, affecting bodies as well as populations.

If the term biopolitics survived its initial trajectory, to the extent that it seems wrong to stretch sketching an overview, its contemporary reappropriation brings about a radical recasting. Certain philosophers aimed to readjust the subject of biopolitics, by proposing competing and incompatible approaches, throughout the process of which they enriched biopolitics’ vocabulary with a set of additional neologisms: “immunopolitics”, “thanatopolitics”, “bioeconomy”, “biocapitalism”, etc. The notion of “biopower” and “biopolitics,” reworked and strengthened into concepts if not into doctrines, have hence become the pivot of philosophical approaches that tend to make the management of life the alpha and the omega of politics and its history. This is notably the case of Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito.

Ceasing to be a research hypothesis and a means to confront Marxism, contemporary biopolitics announces itself within the affirmative register of revelation. Looking for metaphysical foundations and not political standpoints, biopolitics reintroduced itself on the terrain of classical philosophy that critical thought in the 70s had abandoned. Despite the post-Foucauldian starbust around its biopolitical core, there is a red thread running through its diverse conceptualisations: an affirmation that the historical rupture has already taken place. The task would be to describe it, and without a doubt also to dread it, but there’s no hope to escape capitalism’s kettle that, ever more than before, is capable of colonising bodies and the living in their entirety.

At the same time, disconnected from philosophical considerations that are increasingly cut off from the social sciences and of concrete history, it is also on the terrain of economic and sociological analysis that studies of the growing entanglement of capitalism and the life

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1 Lemke 2011, p.9

sciences, using terms such as “biocapitalism” and “bioeconomy” or even developing the question of living labour as the central site of resistance against capitalist logic. These approaches, which aren’t concerned with the question of foundations, try to be descriptive as well as prospective, whilst simultaneously proposing a sometimes-critical analysis of neoliberalism.

Given these conditions, rather than coming up with yet another version of the biopolitical thesis or to disqualify it, it is more useful to consider it as one of the present’s manifestations. How are we to understand that a topic, which came about more than fifty years ago, is spearheading innovative approaches validated by the pandemic to the point of elevating the present to a “Foucauldian moment,”<sup>2</sup> the core event residing in the strange coincidence finally established between things and their order, between a concept of the 1970s and today’s historical moment?

Looking to answer this question, the first part of this article is dedicated to the examination of certain central versions of biopolitics in line with Foucault’s analysis, by resituating this history within the context of neoliberal policies and the weakening of the labour movement of which the former was an effect of the latter and sometimes its cause. The second part connects this critique to a Marxist approach to social reproduction, seeking to redefine the notion of life closely connected to a politics that focusses on the collective reconstruction of a determined alternative to disaster capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Instead of a descriptive or ominous biopolitics, the objective is here to think of a concrete social vitality, full of possibilities, enmeshed with life in the broadest of terms, and of which capitalism set itself the task to fully commodify.

### **Biopolitics according to Michel Foucault: a strategic hypothesis**

If the concept of biopower makes its initial—in print—apparition in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault had already started to develop it in his lectures at the Collège de France, firstly from 1975 to 1976 (*Society Must Be Defended*), and subsequently from 1977 to 1978 (*Security, Territory, Population*) and from 1978 to 1979 (*The Birth of Biopolitics*). But the questioning itself has its roots in earlier works, notably in *The Order of Things*, published in 1966, which already compared the rise of political economy to that of the life sciences.

This incessantly transforming research project was constructed in connection with the vast mutations of the French political, cultural, and ideological landscape starting in the mid-70s and that Foucault managed

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2 Cot 2020

3 Klein 2008

to capture with unbeatable acuteness. His lectures at the Collège de France are a testing ground for the most daring of his conceptual hypotheses allowing to get a sense of the successive readjustments of Foucault's thought and the general limits it upholds.

Daniel Defert cites a letter from 1972 in which Foucault announces to analyse "the most disparaged of all wars: neither Hobbes, nor Clausewitz or class struggle: civil war."<sup>4</sup> Foucault develops the first model, that of war borrowed from Nietzsche, in his 1976 lecture, before abandoning it. But the hypothesis is the occasion to try out the definition of an alternative form of antagonism to that of class struggle. Above all, the notion tries to encompass class by making its assertion simply the extension of a persistent repression model: that of racial conflict. The thesis is provocative, and even more so because the colonial question is at the same time almost completely silenced.

Gradually developed in his lectures the years that follow, the concept of "biopower" gives substance to the previous research agenda. It presents itself like a new hypothesis, reorganising a constellation of adjacent notions, which themselves are continuously reworked in order to distinguish and cross-pollinate diverse modalities of power. "Norms," "governmentality," "security," "control," "discipline,"<sup>5</sup> etc. frame this theoretically abundant space around its central node: rethinking politics at a doubly removed distance of sovereignty and social antagonism.

Vigilant and flexible, reactive to context and attached to construct a global and original understanding of a history relevant to the emergence of a second left, Foucauldian thought remains structured around a permanent confrontation with Marxism. As May 68 starts to wane and the long-term crisis of communism begins to deepen, but equally within the context of the Union of the Left and facing the repressive hypothesis shared by Freudianism and leftism, Foucault reorients himself towards a profoundly ambiguous form of history from below. This variety of history, which is by far more philosophical than historicist, pays attention to norms and the ways in which individuals are simultaneously their intermediaries, their products and sites of continued resistance giving rise to and modifying the forms of the now radically delocalised and desubstantialised forms of power.

Highlighting the productivity and the capillarity of power beyond solely its repressive and vertical dimensions, the Foucauldian concept of biopower stands in opposition to conceptions of the state and Ideological State Apparatuses, as advanced by Louis Althusser. Power, redefined in this way, is indissociable from the knowledge that supports and inhabits it: a reconceptualisation that finds itself to be at the antipodes of the habitual opposition between oppression and truth; between ideology and

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4 Defert 2001, p.42

5 Foucault 1997, p.222

science. But biopolitics, far from being the last Foucauldian analytical tool, is the cornerstone of a more ambitious project. It seeks to produce another critique of political economy, associated with a new conception of subjectivation that draws upon the close-examination of punitive devices – carceral and medical – as they evolve throughout history. In his 1976 lectures, Foucault develops the biopower hypothesis by associating it with a theory of governmentality that gets rid off social relations of production by relying on a greater attention paid to what would be the concrete par excellence: the body. Transitioning, according to him, from the prerogative of "to make die and let live" to the preoccupation of "make live and to let die" power undergoes a metamorphosis. Affirming the trend of foregrounding the ever more direct connection between bodies and a power that has become diffuse, Foucauldian theory transforms its own bypassing of the state in an objective historical fact that ratifies the virulent philosophical rejections of mediation and representation that he shares with the new and non-Marxist French philosophy of the time.

This thesis of biopower that directly builds upon individual and social life dissolves social conflict into a myriad of isolated confrontations, a perpetual Brownian motion without resolution: "power is never entirely on one side, [...] at every moment, it plays out in smaller singular units with local reversals, regional defeat and victories, provisional revenge."<sup>6</sup> Foucault, at times, credits Marx for being the first to analyse discipline (Foucault 2001b p. 1001), an acknowledgement that is used to pit itself against the rest of Marx's work, with great effort to cover up his tracks and pursuing a confrontation meticulous to the extent that it could be confused for a claim of intellectual proximity.

The last major step in this trajectory is his study of neoliberal theories in 1977-78, driving Foucault to uphold that liberalism disposes of a sole and authentic "art of government" which, according to him, lacks in the socialist tradition. But what is this "art of government," if it escapes a logic of sovereignty that was already obsolete by then? The following year, he says that it is nothing else than "the reasoned way of governing best",<sup>7</sup> the liberal version of which is, by essence, always concerned about its own autolimitation.<sup>8</sup> Benefitting from an analysis of knowledge that rejects the Marxist concept of ideology, taking at face value the texts that he approaches as efficiency endowed discourse, Foucault concludes, the next year, that (neo)liberalism, throughout history, presented itself as a critique of irrationality "a critique of the irrationality peculiar to excessive government."<sup>9</sup>

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6 Foucault 1975, p.264

7 Foucault 2008, p.2

8 Ibid., p.20

9 Ibid., p. 341

It goes without saying that definitions like these were and remain, more than ever, questionable. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the subject of biopower played a fundamental and strategic role within the perpetual revision of the Foucauldian project. At the moment Foucault turns his back on leftism in order to come closer to the CFDT trade union and followers of Michel Rocard, clearing the way for a new conception of governmentality that resonates with the political efforts of the Second Left. In the face of a potential victory of the Union of the Left, the Second Left sought to invent a new social-democratic path, abandoning all hopes to break with capitalism yet without trying to win over the traditional right.

Before exploring how neoliberalism could become a working ground for an alternative governmentality, it is the biopower hypothesis that helps him to redefine the field, its method, and the implications of its own theoretical and political project.

Hence, the aim of the concept of biopower is not to periodise political history into distinct moments. Foucault has always insisted on the fact that different apparatuses of power do not succeed each other but merge and interpenetrate each other. Furthermore, this new conceptualisation of politics is inseparable from a novel view of knowledge and regimes of truth, referring to a redefined role of the intellectual, which was one of the major questions in France, and unique to it, at the time.

It is difficult to understand how the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics, so powerfully determined by the theoretico-political trajectory of the author within the specific context that he wanted to intervene in, may be re-appropriated within the context of neoliberal's undisputable victory and the waning of the Fordo-Keynesian exception. Neoliberalism's stronghold, confronted with capitalism's multiple crises, comes with an authoritarian and repressive turn that seems to render this liberal analysis of governmentality obsolete.

Facing the untimely enigma of the resurgence of the notion of biopolitics, it is not enough to evoke the unequalled ideological power of neoliberal institutions and their infinite colours, capable of imposing the language of "good governance".<sup>10</sup> Because it is rather the combination of neoliberalism's power to impose widely disavowed policies, against a backdrop of waning anticapitalistic alternatives and a rising fear of general collapse that explains the present proliferation of the notion of biopolitics or biopower, differently revised as disenchanting observations of total domination.

Within this context of anxious depoliticization and intensifying social antagonism, the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the sentiment of

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that the outdated notion of "governability" reappears in a report by the trilateral commission, shortly before Foucault elaborates the term, in 1975.

the centrality of biological life expressed through its growing precarity. Paradoxically, in the name of an affirmation of politics grafting itself onto life, the rise of the subject of the body reveals itself to be a formidable instrument of abstraction, accompanying critique's metaphysical turn. It is imperative to start by examining this paradox through the most popular and well-received contemporary versions of biopolitics, namely, those of Agamben and Esposito.

### Giorgio Agamben, the ontological turn of biopolitics

COVID-19 has been the occasion for Giorgio Agamben to see, within the time and space of a few days, his philosophy lauded before facing a barrage of criticism. The deluge followed after he took the risk to publish, in the Italian daily *Il Manifesto* of the 26th of February 2020, an intervention denouncing the "frenzied, irrational and totally unjustified emergency measures taken for a supposed epidemic."<sup>11</sup> Following the scandal it provoked, Agamben clarifies his position in an interview in *Le Monde*, published on the 24th of March: "what the epidemic clearly shows is that the state of exception, a state to which governments have now familiarised us with for a long time, has become the norm. People have habituated themselves to a permanent state of crisis that they do no longer seem to realise that their lives have been reduced to a purely biological function, and has not only lost its political dimension, but also any human dimension."<sup>12</sup>

This affirmation lacking any nuance does not summarise Agamben's thought but boils it down to its ethico-political conclusions, disregarding the metaphysical apparatus that underpins them. His oeuvre develops the expected at great length. Always driven by the question, "what does it mean to act politically?"<sup>13</sup>, each volume of *Homo Sacer* describes the principles and the implications of a conception of "the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics."<sup>14</sup> This transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government threatens radically to alter—in fact, has already palpably altered—the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms. Indeed, from this perspective, the state of exception appears as a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism.

This conception, that deliberately inscribes itself within the critical Foucauldian lineage of biopolitics, shares a number of commonalities

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<sup>11</sup> Agamben 2020a

<sup>12</sup> Agamben 2020b

<sup>13</sup> Agamben 2017, p.186

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

as well as divergences with this lineage that needs to be related to the profound transformations of the social and political context since the mid-1970s. To put it briefly: whereas Michel Foucault was still able to present the neoliberal project as a governmentality limiting itself, concerned about the well-being of populations and as an opportunity of a subjectivation open to the care of the self, the global hegemony of neoliberal politics and their regressive parade now forces us to reconsider this definition. What Agamben opted for, within this profoundly changed political, economic, and social context, is to reclaim the notion of state sovereignty. He puts forward a theorization that views the state of exception as the fundamental structure of Western politics, judged essential in its relation to life: “if the law employs the exception—that is the suspension of law itself—as its original means of referring to and encompassing life, then a theory of the state of exception is the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being to law.”<sup>15</sup> The price paid for this simplification of a biopolitical theorisation of the relation between life and power is that it restores a universalising metaphysics, a move far removed from the Foucauldian project and its self-proclaimed nominalism.

Agamben builds his metaphysics around the distinction between natural life (*zoè*) and politically qualified life (*bios*) that characterises itself by exclusion and capture, giving rise to “bare life” as that which allows for an articulation between *zoè* and *bios*, but that does not precede it. Nonetheless, bare life is the originating structure of politics that reveals itself in exception as inclusive exception. The “*homo sacer*,” the guardian figure overlooking the whole of Agamben’s oeuvre, harks back to the individual whom, in Roman archaic law, can be put to death without it being recognized as homicide. Far from being a local and temporary legal aberration, this status, according to Agamben, would be sovereignty’s very structure, “the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension.”<sup>16</sup>

As a consequence, the military model, abandoned by Foucault, becomes pertinent again despite its schematism. Agamben is not afraid to mobilise and to dramatise it to its extreme in the wake of COVID-19: “it is even possible that the epidemic that we are living will be the realisation of global civil war that, according to the most thorough political scientists, has taken the place of traditional world wars. All nations and all peoples are now in an enduring war against themselves, because the invisible and elusive enemy with which they are struggling is within us.”<sup>17</sup>

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15 Ibid

16 Ibid., p.169

17 Agamben 2020c

Welcoming “Foucault’s thesis according to which “what is at stake today is life””,<sup>18</sup> Agamben rapidly distanced himself from it in order to consider that “The *puissance absolue et perpétuelle*, which defines state power, is in the last instance not founded on a political will but on bare life, which is preserved and protected only to the extent that it is subjected to the sovereign’s (or the law’s)”.<sup>19</sup> This peremptory affirmation, discussed at great length, does not rely on any factual data but mobilises, along medieval and ancient authors, repeated references to Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, but also Hannah Arendt, regardless of their mutual incompatibility.

Abandoning Foucauldian norm analysis and their ambivalent subjugating function as well as subjectivation and rejecting Marxian conceptions of the state without having discussed them, Agamben brings back political reflection on the terrain of a split, philosophically constructed, between sovereignty thought as transhistorical and a bare life, judged as unchanging. Some fleetingly mentioned examples, topped up with a stupefying critique of Marx, are mobilised to support the following thesis: “From the Marxian scission between man and citizen there follows that between bare life, ultimate and opaque bearer of sovereignty, and the multiple forms of life abstractly recodified into juridical-social identities (voter, employee, journalist, student, but also HIV-positive, transvestite, porn star, senior citizen, parent, woman).”<sup>20</sup>

Dissociated from all historicist explorations of those disciplines, of techniques of power and forms of governmentality, which constitutes the Foucauldian methodology, the linear narrative that substitutes it simply affirms that “the juridico-political machine of the Occident”<sup>21</sup> has as its aim the production of bare life. The characteristics of bare life is to be separated from all other forms of life and of all connections to an “anthropogenesis”, meaning “the becoming human of the human being.”<sup>22</sup> This history, which progressively and systematically has made of a state of exception the rule, now reveals its hidden essence.

On his part, Foucault conceived of biopolitics as an experimental laboratory to build an alternative to Marxism, competing with its theoretical project and disqualifying its political aim of abolishing capitalism. Once the alternative got defeated and hopes for a stable form of capitalism were lost, and after the Foucauldian programme having shown its incapacity to escape neoliberalism’s appeal, biopolitics lost all

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18 Agamben 2017, p.1216

19 Ibid., p.1215

20 Ibid., p.1216

21 Agamben 2017, p.360, translation my own, S.M.

22 Ibid. p.1215

its authority. The last move left, in its multitude of variations, is to play on the pathos of a menaced and helpless life. The accusation of the Western state in general and its fundamental tendency to end in extermination camp logics, and nothing less, offers but a discourse repeating *ad nauseam* the dark prophecy of its own realization.<sup>23</sup>

Behind his argumentative refinement, Agamben promotes a fundamentally binary speculative anarchism that opposes a tendentially exterminating power to a rebel destituent power that invariably replicates its antithesis, but that yet succeeds in “thinking (*sic*) a purely destituent potential, which is to say, one completely set free from the sovereign relation of the ban that links it to constituted power.”<sup>24</sup> Singing the same old tune of revolutions inevitably ending up in statism and authoritarianism, Agamben is opposed to all social and economic reform. The only thing left is to offer some consolation in the erudition and morals of Patristics and medieval Aristotelianism.

Nonetheless, certain passages give the impression that we’re not really dealing with an ethics. Recalling that Franciscans never criticised property, Agamben considers Saint-Paul as the precursor of this desubjectification and of the “mystique of daily life” which he wishes to see as the only escape from subjugation. Paul “calls “usages” ways of life that at the same time do not directly confront power (...). It seems to me that the notion of way of life, in this sense, is very interesting: it is a practice of which we cannot assign the subject. You remain a slave, but, because you are making use of it, in the form of the “as not,” you are no longer a slave.”<sup>25</sup> Within this “as not” form, everything effectively resembles its contrary, the most disgraceful statements become the bearers of the highest morals and the sanctification of the present its most radical critique.

Agamben’s thought, thus, transits from ontology to ontology occasionally ornamenting itself with allusions to a real world that is already presupposed to be fully revealed and reduced to its immanent legal logic. Hence, the rejection of contradictions, another debt to the philosophy of the previous sequence, leads him to affirm, without any nuance and regardless of all factual data, a social world that is ever more homogenous, without class, composed of individuals that are all identically numb, arrived at a stage of supreme debilitation, with the almost miraculous exception of the author’s diagnostics: “if we had once again to conceive of the fortunes of humanity in terms of class, then today we would have to say that there are no longer social classes,

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23 Boukalas 2014. The critique of the legal component of this argument has been developed by Boukalas.

24 Agamben 2017, p.1269

25 Agamben 2020, translation my own S.M.

but just a single planetary petty bourgeoisie, in which all the old social classes are dissolved.”<sup>26</sup>

Continuing in this vein, Agamben does not hesitate to state that this massification verifies fascist theses by realising them. If the world is fascist, the fascist fantasy of a social world without conflict is nothing but its adequate theory. And if the levelling out of class is no longer the enchanting prognostics of social democratic sociologists who converted to liberalism, like Alain Tourinae did, the withering of class difference is proof of this irresistible fascist victory because it already took place: “but this is also exactly what fascism and Nazism understood, and to have clearly seen the irrevocable decline of the old social subjects constitutes their insuperable cachet of modernity. (From a strictly political point of view fascism and Nazism have not been overcome, and we still live under their sign.)”<sup>27</sup>

With Agamben, biopolitics literally collapses on top of the metaphor that gives it ground, no longer designating eternal conflict between two entities. Power, whatever its form and the epoch, is merely an artificial graft of which the causes remain incomprehensible. This conception makes it impossible to envisage whatever perspective for radical democratisation and the social organization of production, whilst simultaneously excluding from its field of analysis the question of exploitation and domination, as well as the struggles that fight them.

Thus, after having distorted the contemporary state into an exterminatory machine, Agamben can conclude that “the novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.”<sup>28</sup>

In one go, the overcoming of capitalism and the conquest of state power are sidelined, supposedly destined to relapse into totalitarianism, for the benefit of an immediacy that reconnects with romantic and reactionary ideals and its vitalist offshoots, from Edmund Burke to Friedrich Nietzsche and from Henri Bergson to Gustave Le Bon, to mention only a few. Biopolitics understood in these terms reactivates the old organicist conception of politics: “Western politics is, in this sense, constitutively “representative,” because it always already has to reformulate contact into the form of a relation. It will therefore be necessary to think politics as an intimacy unmediated by any articulation or representation: human beings, forms-of-life are in contact, but this is unrepresentable because it consists precisely in a representative void,

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26 Agamben 2007, p.70

27 Ibid

28 Ibid., p.80

that is, in the deactivation and inoperativity of every representation. To the ontology of non-relation and use there must correspond a non-representative politics.”<sup>29</sup>

In the rarefied ether of pure concepts, but also in the context of the advanced crisis of democracy, these types of sentences ring true, at first glance, because they reflect and propagate such a long-lasting depoliticisation that it causes the forgetting and the denial of that history itself, of the history of the left’s political and social defeat. The literary completion of the Italian left’s debacle transformed into destiny, these analyses hit the wall regarding those issues that they’re supposed to tackle: the COVID-19 crisis does not really reaffirm the excess of the state in general, but rather the failure of collectively organising public services, and more broadly the blatant lack of democratic forms of organisation and the planification of human activities, overall.

### Roberto Esposito’s Immunopolitics

The Italian philosopher of the same generation as Agamben, Roberto Esposito proposes a variation of biopolitics readjusted to our present condition, and elaborates the notion of “immonopolitics,” closely resonating with the current pandemic. Coming up with another dissident reading of Foucauldian biopolitics, Esposito suggests to understand the problem of immunity as a profound historical causality: “this need for exemption and protection that originally belonged to the medical and juridical fields, has spread to all sectors and languages of our lives, to the point that the immunitary *dispositif* has become the coagulating point, both real and symbolic, of contemporary existence.”<sup>30</sup>

Looking to escape the aporia and political impasses to which Agamben’s work leads, Esposito holds on to its ontological pre-occupations, hereby equally setting out on a quest for some ultimate and abstract principle of understanding. It is to the opposition between immunity and community that he ascribes that role. According to him, if every society expresses “a demand for autoprotection,” a thesis he presents as evidence requiring no further proof, this demand would today have become “the linchpin around which both the real and imaginary practices of an entire civilization have been constructed.”<sup>31</sup>

Like for Agamben, only etymology allows to excavate a hidden and sustainably operative foundation: in Latin, *immunitas* and *communitas* are derived from *munus*, law, change or gift. *Immunis* thus designates those who have no obligations towards the other. In light of this argument that the author qualifies as “etymologico-paradigmatic,” his

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29 Agamben 2017, p.1243

30 Esposito 2013, p.59

31 Ibid

conclusion imposes itself even better than were it to simply precede and guide the analysis: “modern democracy speaks a language that is opposed to that of community insofar as it always has introjected into it an immunitary imperative.”<sup>32</sup>

While distinguishing himself from Agamben, Esposito’s political diagnosis is dark: “a world without an outside— that is, a world completely immunized— is by definition without an inside.”<sup>33</sup> The immunity model of politics finds itself anchored to a metaphor that medicalises the social in order to better denounce this logic, supposedly real, following this circular deduction. But the circularity of the analysis posits itself as the reflection of a self-devouring world, drowning in a never-ending play of mirrors between identity and false otherness.

Hence appropriating the case of auto-immune diseases, Esposito describes what he considers to be the contemporary world’s auto-destruction, torn between diverse “civilisations” that, in reality, only form a single one. The 9/11 attacks, elevated to the status of a paradigmatic event, “in other words, the present conflict appears to burst forth from the dual pressure of two immunitary obsessions that are both opposed and specular: an Islamic extremism that is determined to protect to the death what it considers to be its [...] purity from contamination by Western secularization, and a West that is bent on excluding the rest of the planet from sharing in its own excess goods.”<sup>34</sup> The egocentric North against the envious South turning the poverty it endures into a phantasmagoric purity: the analysis reaching its peak when presenting this opposition as a stable arch that the 9/11 attacks would have breached.

Because, in a typical utterance of this metaphysical turn in contemporary political philosophy that in fact propagates the worst of clichés, Esposito is not afraid to proclaim that “what exploded along with the Twin Towers was the dual immunitary system that until then had kept the world intact.”<sup>35</sup> When it comes to the authoritarian and surveillance turn of the neoliberal state, far from offering an analysis of its political and social functions, it is only looked at through the lens of a rhetorical model, this time on the level of metonymy: exclusion would be the buried truth of politics, which would be sufficient a description of the whole of politics. Either way, Agamben repeats that modernity characterises itself by the fact that life has become directly political. Biopolitics is the designation of this ongoing fusion, a proposal that is far removed from the apparatuses of control studied by Foucault.

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32 Ibid., p.39

33 Ibid., p.46

34 Ibid., p.62

35 Ibid.

For Esposito as well as for Agamben, *reductio ad hitlerium*, to borrow Leo Strauss term, reveals itself to be the central node of post-Foucauldian biopolitics. Crediting Nietzsche with an unprecedented political lucidity regarding the growing domination that politics exercises over life, Esposito considers that “twentieth-century totalitarianism, but especially that of the Nazis, signals the apex of this thanatopolitical drift”.<sup>36</sup> “as in so-called autoimmune diseases, here too the immune system is strengthened to the point of fighting the very body that it should be saving, but it is now causing that body’s decomposition.”<sup>37</sup> Extending the metaphor a little too far, Esposito does not seem to notice that he simultaneously legitimates another, more appropriate, immune-reaction. It is difficult to escape slippery into reactionary vitalism when it is never addressed.

Attributing to Nazism the invention of their own philosophy, following Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas 2018), Esposito criticises it for only being “a philosophy entirely translated in biological terms.”<sup>38</sup> Henceforth, he permits himself to observe Nazism from this angle of this theoretical, biologising, inversion, substituting real historical processes, that of the historical emergence of fascism, and its current revival. By virtue of this strictly rhetorical analysis of history, that doesn’t confront itself to any other analysis, the abolition of mediation appears as a fact, as irreversible as the growing confusion between norm and exception: “contrary to the illusions of those who imagined it was possible to retroactively skip over what for them amounted to the Nazi parenthesis so as to reconstruct the governing principles of the preceding period, life and politics are bound together in a knot that can’t be undone.”<sup>39</sup>

These broken mediations that are the state and institutions, but also organised forms of class struggle, are defined as the perversion and capture of life. Subsequently, the analysis here converges with fascist hatred for political parties, unions, parliaments, without worrying to turn the ideology that accompanied their violent destruction into a valid theory. Paying the price of this outrageous concession, politics, as a whole, is presented to be destined to fall back “more and more made [on] the bare ground of biology. Terrorism would be the simple and pure achievement of Nazi thanato-politics. “No longer does only death make a dramatic entrance into life, but now life itself is constituted as death’s instrument”, whereas, again as this mirror-image, “the prevention of mass terror itself tends to absorb and reproduce the very modalities of terror.”<sup>40</sup>

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36 Ibid., p.73

37 Ibid.

38 Esposito 2010, p.160

39 Esposito 2013, p.75

40 Ibid., pp.76-77

The biopolitical hypothesis, transformed into a key to universal understanding, opens itself up to a catastrophic and simplistic scenario, a by-product of an inverted philosophy of history that underpins this political variant of collapsology. Leading to overwhelming stupefaction, it no longer rhymes with the hopes of a third way, which drove Foucault, but with the observation of its failure, a failure strengthened by ever recalling, not only the complete disappearance of revolutionary projects, but equally the highly restrained possibilities to transform social life.

If there’s any hope afloat, this shipwreck of emancipation, in the mixed waters of dissolved politics, it is only a vague perspective, never constructed intentionally, of a “democratic biopolitics, that is capable of exercising itself not on bodies but in favor of them”, the author recognising that what this “might mean today is quite difficult to identify conclusively.”<sup>41</sup> Within the direct lineage of the philosophical tradition of the 1970s and of its critique of the subject, Giorgio Agamben equally recommends desubjectivation, whereas Esposito is pleading for a “philosophy of the impersonal,” the category of person would be, according to him, the origin of all discrimination.

However, in an interview he gave regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, Esposito significantly bends his position and suddenly changes his vocabulary. On the one hand, he states that “our capitalist society is fundamentally an unequal society. In critical situations, this inequality becomes more pronounced, but also less and less bearable” (Esposito 2020). On the other hand, he undertakes to concretise his notion of “affirmative biopolitics,” advocating for investments in public healthcare, the construction of hospitals, free access to medication, etc. These remarks, that are more readily associated with traditional critiques of capitalism, to which the notion of biopolitics adds nothing, does not find any resonance in the rest of his oeuvre.

For want of a political consideration of these propositions, and a precise and documented study of the ongoing course of neoliberalism, Esposito’s suggestions are stuck in traditional recipes that today are equally in crisis. A crisis that moreover constitutes the origin and horizon of his thought: “Institutions are necessary. But the point is that, with institutions, we should not only think about the state or state apparatuses. An institution is also a non-governmental organization or a volunteer group.”<sup>42</sup> Despite the lack of audacity of this proposal, it remains true that such an obvious contradiction challenges his entire conceptual edifice that those few lines manage to undermine.

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41 Ibid., pp.110-111

42 Esposito 2020

## Bioeconomy or biocapitalism?

Based on this brief exposition, we can thus ask ourselves what purpose the concept of biopolitics serves today. If it's incapable of adequately describing a historically determined moment in time, is it only the expression of political hopelessness sublimated into an absolute metaphysics, an erudite pathos? Is it destined to lead, after going through the same arguments all over again, to the circumventing of all analysis of capitalism without taking the time to discuss existing research? What had been Foucault's permanent confrontation with Marx, and through his thought with socialist alternatives or communism, continuously energised his research, the notion of biopolitics representing only one of its landmarks. The disappearance of this antagonism gives way to a discourse that, without end, dizzily runs in circles around its own presuppositions.

However, is it desirable to simply dismiss the notion of biopolitics, reducing it to mystifying chatter? Because the notion does have its effects and stakes. If its fault is to incite passivity, its merit remains to stress the murderous turn of neoliberal politics and to ring alarm at the destruction that it imposes on our lives and nature. Ecocides but also feminicides and racism, ravaging social life, make all the more manifest the inclusion of the human world in nature that it transforms as well as the socialisation that that relation brings about.

But even for Hegel, the postures of the beautiful soul have objective consequences that demand to overcome the moment of pure lamentation. Today, the causes should be sought on the side of capitalism's interlocked crises, multiplying one after the other. If the pandemic highlights the fact that, eventually, it is a gamble with human life, it are the ongoing processes that need to be grasped, the contradictions and the fissures that to be opened, the mediations and transformations that need to be rebuilt within the context of the relentless social struggles of our time. The current situation reveals that it is not the tendential victory of the logic of extermination, but the general repressive intensification that comes with the degradation of the public health care system, after decennia of neoliberal politics seeking to destroy and to commodify public services. And yet, it's this dimension that biopolitical analyses circumvent, incapable of thinking the complexity of the capitalist state in connection to real power relations and to the long conflictual history that it grounds.

It turns out that other approaches that affirm the centrality of life have tried to rectify this shortcoming. This is the case for the term of bioeconomics, coined as early as in the 1970s by the economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and that later got picked up by degrowth and development economics proponents, such as René Passet in France. But this approach is equally reexplored, in particular since the 2010s, and connected to the rise of environmental concerns, by neoliberal institutions and their promoters.

On their part, liberal theoreticians of bioeconomics tend to construct a euphoric vision of green capitalism, based on a quiet transition from fossil fuels to renewable biomass energy. The European Commission endowed itself with a "Bioeconomy Observatory," and France, like autres states, declares itself to be concerned with "bioeconomic strategy". The Club of Rome is one of its pioneers, commissioning the MIT for their famous Meadows report on the "limits of growth," developing the notion of "zero growth," questioning, above all, population growth in the Global South. If the report incited extensive debate at the time, it also was the occasion for conservatism and catastrophism to come together, attributing centrality to the question of life on both an economic and ideologic level.

Biopolitics distinguishes itself from this approach. On the contrary to classical notions of biopolitics, that opposed to Marxism another conception of history, it is remarkable that contemporary analysts of biocapitalism return to the work of Marx in order to find a way towards a renewed critique of political economy. As such, the anthropologist and researcher of new technologies, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, suggests to redefine "coproduction," the relation between the social sciences and life sciences on the one hand and economics on the other, reminding that 'the life sciences are overdetermined by the capitalistic political economic structures within which they emerge.'<sup>43</sup>

Exploring the coexistence between market and the speculative logics of pharmaceutical industries and biotech in the US and in India, he stresses the economic and social diversity internal to capitalism. But, within the context of global biocapitalism, the national specificities of biocapital are to be linked to the different strategies of large industrial groups. This would however not announce "a new phase of capitalism,"<sup>44</sup> whilst giving rise to "something more than just the encroachment of capital on a new domain of the life sciences."<sup>45</sup>

Sweeping aside familiar accusations of reductionism held against Marx, accusations the unequal ability of Marxism to analyse the way in which capital flows "are constantly animated by multiple, layered, and complex interactions between material objects and structural relations of production, on the one hand, and abstractions, whether they are forms of discourse, ideology, fetishism, ethics, or salvatory or nationalist belief systems and desires, on the other."<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, he insists on isolating Marx's "methodology" from any revolutionary option.<sup>47</sup>

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43 Sunder Rajan 2006, p.6

44 Ibid., p.277

45 Ibid., p.283

46 Ibid., p.20

47 Ibid., p.7

The sociologist Melinda Cooper goes a step further into politicising the analysis of biocapitalism, by studying the relation between capital's current accumulation regime on the one hand, and life sciences and technology on the other, but equally their combination, at first glance improbable, with the ideology of the American evangelical right. She shows that on the contrary to the leftish and oppositional hues of these questions and their appearance on the terrain of French and continental philosophy, American post-industrial literature that developed within the lineage of the Meadows report, as well as the corresponding growth in popularity of the notion of bioeconomy, opened the way to neoliberal politics initiated by Ronald Reagan, "a policy that combined virulent anti-environmentalism and cutbacks in redistributive public health with massive federal investment in the new life science technologies."<sup>48</sup>

In this context, which is also that of an American imperialist politics, Cooper pinpoints the existence of "intense traffic of ideas between recent theoretical biology and neoliberal rhetorics of economic growth."<sup>49</sup> She brings to light the ideological construction that will allow neoliberals, under George W. Bush's presidency, to combine developments in the biomedical sector, and more particularly in STEM with cells coming from frozen embryos, the commercialization of the life sciences but also the reorientation of biology for military ends, reactionary pro-life and survivalist gospel, white supremacy, neoconservative discourse and protestant theology of debt, explicitly readjusted for the objective. "US imperialism (...) needs to be understood as the extreme, 'cultish' form of capital."<sup>50</sup> Using categories elaborated by Marx, allow her to think the interplay between this continuously remoulded ideology and the contradictory dynamics of capitalism: "the drive to overcome limits and relocate in the speculative future is the defining movements of capital, according to Marx."<sup>51</sup>

This neoliberal hegemony, forced into permanent offensive, knows how to connect its discourse and its practices, accompanying the rise of a bioeconomy that is both global and differentiated, in the context of an imperial and conflictual logic and in connection with a conception of work, production, and reproduction thought of as cost-reduction means. In this way, the European and North American pharmaceutical industry is offshoring its clinical tests on human guinea pigs to countries where ethical constraints are most relaxed, in particular in India and China: "this trend toward the offshoring of biomedical and clinical labor, along with the emergence of transnational markets in 'donated' organs, blood,

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48 Cooper 2015, p.18

49 Ibid., p.20

50 Ibid., p.165

51 Ibid., p.25

tissues and eggs, points to the new division of labor, life, and surplus that are likely to accrue around a fully fledged bioeconomy."<sup>52</sup> In conclusion, she mentions, without further precision, the associated emergence of "new modes of contestation."<sup>53</sup>

Despite its limits, the previous analyses of biocapitalism, breaking with vitalist metaphors as well as with the thesis of a direct grafting of politics onto life, undertakes a study of the strategies developed by neoliberal officials who are more than conscious of their class interests that they defend by managing a flawless art of mediation and lobbying. Their activity and convictions, in all respects, break with biopolitical theories. On the contrary to concerns about population, according to the hypothesis that naively takes the first version of neoliberal discourse at face value, but far removed from extermination logics, it's the strengthening of exploitation and all forms of oppression that neoliberalism now concentrates that Cooper and Rajan see as the only means to escape the crisis of capitalism, low productivity gains and the threat it presents to the rate of profit.

This logic of total commodification and the destruction of previous social gains includes a new relation to knowledge that goes as far as the falsification of scientific reports, to the point of, according to the Marxist biologist Rob Wallace, "perverting science for political gain is itself in a pandemic phase."<sup>54</sup> Given these conditions, the virus even becomes, in certain regards, a competitive opportunity. "In a kind of bioeconomic warfare, agribusiness can prosper when deadly influenza strains originating from their own operations spread out to their smaller competition. No conspiracy theory need apply. No virus engineered in a laboratory. No conscious acts of espionage or sabotage. Rather we have here an emergent neglect from the moral hazard that arises when the costs of intensive husbandry are externalized."<sup>55</sup>

Hence, positioning himself in opposition to the conspiracy tendencies of Agamben, the real ideological power that accompanies the inverted world of capitalism does not consist out of lying but producing a discourse that represents a real descriptive capacity, readjusting dominant prejudices and beliefs to facts, whilst simultaneously combining this discourse with concrete political practices that in turn seem to validate them. Covid-19 is a perfect example of Naomi Klein's shock doctrine. It is the occasion to speed up neoliberal policy, to extend the control and repression of the working class and social mobilization, to fortify borders, stoking up racism and nationalism, reinforcing the

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52 Ibid., p.175

53 Ibid., p.176

54 Wallace 2016, p.22

55 Ibid., p.115

domination of women, accelerating the destruction of nature, whereas the pandemic, and public health disasters alike, are the very product of this logic of capitalism: the advanced dismantling of public services, rampant extractivism, anarchic urbanisation, deforestation, and the destruction of the natural habitats of pathogenic species, mass animal extinction, the explosion of agribusiness, the subjugation of the sciences, etc.

The profound movements of contemporary financialised capitalism are shining through the apparently natural character of the epidemic: the destruction of public healthcare is a choice that made it impossible to face the afflux of sick people, contributing to the rapid spread of the virus, that is indisputably dangerous but only relatively lethal, and transforming it into a large scale public health disaster. If, from the outbreak to its management, it is capitalism that is at stake, how to oppose a logic that is so consistent and powerful despite being in radical crisis? How to find an alternative project that is not stuck in counter discourse or in infinite variations of biopolitical catastrophism? An alternative that equally knows how to ground itself concretely in strategies and practices, struggles, and forms of organization that are capable to fight the ongoing destruction? In other words: how to rebuild a world, worthy of the name, upon preexisting and persistent solidarities?

### Metabolism and social reproduction

It is thus not the objective to simply deal away with the question of life, but to redefine it and to repoliticise it, in order to intervene in the most vivid contradictions of a historical sequence that the pandemic accentuates and still accelerates—as if it needed it—our catastrophic course. Noticing these contradictions doesn't consist in bemoaning the colonization of the world and knowledge under the sway of power directly hooked up on the living, such an analysis crushes the space for political and social collective intervention. The question is rather to confront, theoretically and politically, a form of contemporary capitalism facing its own waning viability and growing radical contestation that it simultaneously fosters and fights. The exploration of a dialectics alike, beyond all ephemeral and stagnant opposition, is the prime condition to reconstituting a political perspective of radical change, an outlook that made up Marx's analytical principles: the critique of political economy.

By forbidding to think real contradictions in a dialectical theoretical framework, loathed by Foucault, biopolitics and its derivatives replicated, and amplified, the originally liberal split that tends to cut politics off from the relations of production. A conceptual tool for the long-standing circumvention of the question of production and reproduction, this approach initially contributed to refocussing critique on circulation and consumption, subsequently it narrowed analysis down to perfected forms of control, targeting individual bodies, before ending up with appalling metaphysics. Whereas the notion of biopolitics and bodies pretend to

exhume the most fundamental and most radical level of politics, it limited itself to visible manifestations of social relations, without proceeding to the study of concrete forms of exploitation and contemporary domination.

But how, whilst distancing ourselves from a descriptive or ominous biopolitics, to rethink a social vitality that is as fragile as it is tenacious, traversed by possibilities that in effect engage with the biological and natural phenomena that capitalism has undertaken to commodify, in order to work towards the reappropriation of our social and sentient lives? This is the prompt of the "*Structural One Health*". They propose a historico-materialist approach in aetiology linked to a detailed analysis of contemporary capitalism, of its modal chains and its social, and ecological consequences.<sup>56</sup>

Seen from this angle, the question of life finds back its dynamism of social struggle and strategic perspectives that it integrates into its approach. Two topics in particular are to be reexplored. The first is that of living labour and of the labour force, allowing to come back to the question of production that had been abandoned by biopolitics. The second, in connection with the latter, is that of social reproduction, metabolism at the second level, which involves picking up again, not the vitalist metaphor and its naturalising unthought, but the question of the nature-human unity in order to readjust it to the most lively and vibrant political issues of our time.

In both cases, the question is to abandon the simple opposition between vital dynamism and stultifying structures. Because capitalism itself is also a dynamic and adapting process — even if it takes life only by vampirising social activity, in accordance with Marx's formula — although being structured in forms and institutions that assure its reproduction and regulation. Capitalism distinguishes itself from other modes of production because of its tendency to appropriate, as fully as possible, the labour force, the time of people's lives and to take hold of the future itself. In this regard, the diverse analyses of living labour as the central site of resistance to the logic of capital, as developed by Italian operaists, Toni Negri, or by a theoretician of *Weltkritik*, such as Moishe Postone, also call for a discussion that does not have its place here.

Reconsidered as a determined historical contradiction, capitalist alienation is the site of struggle between a certain aspiration to reappropriate individual human capacities and their mutilating crushing. The question is thus rightly strategic and not metaphysical. How, departing from this aspiration, to trigger a "democratic revolution of labour",<sup>57</sup> a reappropriation of human activities whereof the results found

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56 Foster & Suwandi 2020. "For proponents of Structural One Health the key is to ascertain how pandemics in the contemporary global economy are connected to the circuits of capital that are rapidly changing environmental conditions." (John Bellamy Foster et Intan Suwandi 2020).

57 Cukier 2020

themselves separated from, and turned against, their producers, on the economic and political but also the cultural domain? Thought in this way, the question of life extends itself to collective and revolutionary capacities inventing adequate forms for the reorganization of the relation between society and nature that constitutes a specific metabolism.

This notion of metabolism, used by Marx and revived notably by John Bellamy Foster,<sup>58</sup> which generated a very rich debate around *Metabolic Rift Theory*, allows to overcome the simplistic idea of human beings facing nature as an externality. It paves the way for what could be a redefinition of the politics and strategy of life in a broad sense, as a site for struggle that is now decisively between a democratic reappropriation of our collective history or its destruction by capitalism, in effect threatening, in the long-run, all forms of life. This approach makes of organised class struggle the means to reconnect the question of social needs and reproduction, broadly speaking, to a fight against the whole of existing forms of domination, allowing to think the political federation of struggles, not as a simple addition to isolated conflicts, but as a connected network of social conflicts, all linked to a mode of production that entered its lethal phase of “catastrophe capitalism”.

It are these challenges, as significant as they are urgent, that mirror the current pandemic and the concomitant rise of the question of biopolitics, failing to shed a light on the interaction between the causalities and their deep-rootedness in social work, production, and the reproduction of social life as a whole. The fact that migrants, people of colour, women, the working classes, and the global South are the first victims of this crisis, or, as David Harvey says, the fact that “the progress of COVID-19 exhibits all the characteristics of a class, gendered, and racialized pandemic” (Harvey 2020), demonstrates that biopolitics is decisively neither the name of the problem nor the solution, but actually the intuition of challenges of an unprecedented scale.

Social reproduction theory situates itself on a terrain that the notion of biopolitics cannot reach, because it conflates and confuses registers instead of articulating activities within the mode of production that would give them unity. If we situate ourselves on the terrain of the critique of political economy as Marx conceived it, meaning that it never reduces the question of production to solely its economic dimension, which in turn is often summarised as its commercial dimension, production is inseparable from reproduction. Reproduction is the quasi-biological, although fundamentally social, operation regenerating the labour force, but it is also the reproduction of social relations themselves, days after day.

Reproduction and production are not two distinct sections of social life, but two dimensions of the same logic. By virtue of his

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58 Foster 2011

understanding of the mode of production as a contradictory totality, Marx could state that “every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction.”<sup>59</sup> Their distinction lies in that the production process, considered as a process of reproduction, “produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces the capital relations itself ; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer,”<sup>60</sup> Here, it is not bare life that we need to identify behind apparatuses of power. It’s on the contrary social life, concretely determined, and which thus requires to think production and reproduction as specifically capitalist.

Reproduction aims at the perpetuation of waged labour as such, meaning labour power itself, in concrete conditions and insofar “the maintenance and reproduction of the working class remains a necessary condition for the reproduction of capital.”<sup>61</sup> But this process is the centre of an essential contradiction that opposes the capitalist logic of transforming human work force in pure and simple commodities to the fact, as Marx stresses, that the work force is not produced as a commodity but only exchanged as such by those who own them. This exchange is the result of a long history of capitalist social formation, which separates workers from their means of production in order to convert them into wage-earners.

### Changing life?

If the life of capitalism and the life imposed by capitalism are to be defeated, it is exactly because of their profoundly unlivable and lethal characteristics that makes it, eventually, unbearable. It needs to be immediately pointed out that this affirmation is not derived from some moral judgment or a confrontation with this form of life led astray from a “real life,” as an ontological critique would uphold. The argument here is the result of an immanent and objective critique deploying itself in direct connection with real contradictions and the conscient struggles that they fuel.

Nancy Fraser writes that “every form of capitalist society harbors a deep seated social-reproductive ‘crisis tendency’ or ‘contradiction’ . On the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which he relies.”<sup>62</sup> This contradiction gains a potential political reach, amplified by the current public health

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59 Marx 1976, p.711

60 Ibid., p.726

61 Ibid., p.718

62 Fraser 2017, p.63

crisis. The work force's relative protection, mediated by decisions that hamper if not block certain sectors of production, enters into a complex conflictual relation with a capitalist logic of precarisation, competition and social hierarchisation combining racism, sexism, and exploitation.

Initiating and aggravating, specifically, a crisis of reproduction, which yet is inseparable from the general crisis of capitalism, this contradiction is that which, underneath our eyes, is exploding and rightfully imposes the need to place the subject of life at the centre of analysis. This is what certain approaches to Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) try to achieve, wanting to contribute to anticapitalist struggles. "Social Reproduction Theory is primarily concerned with understanding how categories of oppression (such as gender, race, and ableism) are coproduced in simultaneity with the production of surplus-value."<sup>63</sup>

In SRT, those who consider themselves to work within the Marxist tradition, it's in light of class struggle that questions regarding contemporary life are clarified. According to Martha Gimenez,<sup>64</sup> in accordance with the Marxian idea that the mode of production determines the mode of reproduction, it is indeed the capitalist class' control exercised over its own conditions of reproduction and those of the working classes that determines, in the last instance, relations between the sexes and the role of the family. But this control is contradictory in itself. Under capitalism, the worker, dispossessed from the means of production is only the owner of their labour power, that they "freely" sell and that they equally "freely" maintain, a form of care emanating from the private sphere of social production. This separation leads to making the nuclear family and domestic labour, carried out by women, the core site of the reproduction of the labour force.

Marked by relations of dependence and domination, taking on the appearance of free choice but also that of a form of domination that would be exclusively male, the household is the site where a complex causality unfolds and distorts itself, presenting the ambiguity, or more precisely the truly dialectical nature, of all mediations reconfigured by capitalism. Just like the state, knowledge, and money, the family home finds itself constituted into a separate sphere that refracts and reproduces the social relations of production that it might at first perceive as external or even radically foreign to itself.

Thus, like all other mediations, the family structure, the status of women, and in particular racialised women that see themselves being delegated household chores in a commodified form, but equally sexualities, are sites of specific struggles. These struggles, conceived

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63 Battacharya 2017, p.46

64 Gimenez 2018, ch.2

of in a narrow way, can nourish insular identity logics, but they can also become the active source for growing anticapitalist consciousness, susceptible of putting the abolition of capitalism, through their political and critical structuring, back on the agenda.

From this point of view, affirming the centrality of capitalist relations of production does not undermine feminist (or antiracist) struggles in their fundamental connection to the ecological question. On the contrary, this affirmation consists in recognising causal subordination as well as the centrality of reproductive work that, in all its dimensions, contributes to forge labour power as a capacity or a power of the living individual, irreducible to their status of employee, and struggling for living conditions in line with its historically constructed social essence. "Human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole."<sup>65</sup>

In turn, reducing the question of reproduction to the question of production levels out and obfuscates the complex structuration of social and capitalist relations, and consequently, disregards global challenges, demands, and aspirations, which are always individual without ceasing to be social, profoundly political without ceasing to be intimate. This is exactly the node that allows for a figure of the "true life" to construct itself that isn't under the guise of an eternal and chimeric dream or of some exterior programme of infinite conflicts that involves us. Living better now, and living truly, is to struggle and to succeed in metabolising momentum into collective political power.

Translation by Solange Manche

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65 Battacharya 2017, p.15

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