

The biopolitical paradox: population and security mechanisms

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Diagnosing the present between Kant and Nietzsche

Attempting to understand the meaning of biopolitics according to Foucault involves referring to a discontinuous series, the fragmentary emergence of this problematisation throughout his writing, posthumous texts, and the works of those who are continuing it today. However, this paper proposes a possible reading centred on *security mechanisms* as the key to accessing a diagnosis of our present political experience shaped by the paradox of biopolitics. The proposition arises as a consequence of a *certain philosophical gesture* that Foucault himself called the *attitude of modernity*, a gesture between Kant and Nietzsche.

Thus, it seems appropriate to begin with a detour via this philosophical gesture, a gesture that, according to Foucault, we can position as a philosophical event in the answer given by Kant in 1784 to the question *Was ist Aufklärung?* It is in that answer that the question of *current reality* as a philosophical problem appeared for the first time. Although it was not that text that commenced the reflection on the present, it did commence and find its originality in a way of thinking about the relationship with one's own *present* and one's virtual *current reality*. In Foucault's terms, what Kant established was the possibility of an *ontology of*

the present or ontology of ourselves. That must be considered not as a theory or doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as "an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (Foucault 1991).

Without a doubt, this approach is one of the essential tasks that thought must tackle, that is, thinking about one's own present in a sagittal manner, which continuously brings us back to the task of thinking about a possible future. This is what Deleuze called Foucauldian *the Actual*, stating that, for Foucault, what counts is the difference between the

present and *the Actual*. Current reality is all that is new and interesting. Current reality is not what we are, but rather what we become, what we are becoming; in other words, it is the Other, our becoming-other. The present, on the contrary, is what we are and, therefore, what we are already ceasing to be (Deleuze 1986, pp.113–114).¹

And it is precisely this *becoming-something-other-than-what-we-are* that can be set in motion through the Kantian gesture that Foucault retrieves and places at the centre of his work. In this sense, thought is presented as a task of problematisation. Updating our thought means being able to formu-

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late a precise form of inquiry and, through that questioning formulation, that interrogative gesture, make our present current. It is in that difference, between the present and the Actual, that Foucault decided to inscribe or engrave his lines which, in a way, seek to question us critically and historically about ourselves, question us about the limits of our experience, about the ways in which we think about ourselves and do not think about ourselves, about the considered and unconsidered aspects of our practices, and through that gap, make our *present become other*. What type of experience are we capable of achieving in our present? How was that experience formed? How is it possible that we are who we are? And then, also, how is it possible that we become others? It is there, in that difference, that it becomes essential to read the question of a *biopolitics*.

In Deleuze's terms, thinking that is interested in the present experiences the possibility of updating it, of becoming-other. Therefore, the critical question must be taken beyond Kant to its Nietzschean *positive form* in the sense of a historic investigation that seeks to deduce from the contingency of what we are the possibility of a becoming-other. Nietzsche discovered that the particular activity of philosophy consists of *diagnostic work*: the question What are we today? What is this "today" in which we live? But in that practice, he also discovered a *therapy*, a *cure*. In this sense, the historical ontology of ourselves performs a diagnosis based solely on signs perceived in the present and, at the same time, points out, in what happens, what produces a crack in what we are, revealing *lines of fragility*.

Thus, *biopolitics* is merely one sign among many others in our present. The diagnosis concludes that our present has become biopolitical. Hence, it is necessary to analyse the *origin* (*Herkunft*) of that sign and open a possible space for a *future* (*Zukunft*). Thus, when Foucault stated in that famous passage from *The Will to Knowledge* that, until modernity, humanity was what it was for Aristotle, but that, thereafter, it transformed itself into an animal whose politics placed its existence as a living being in question (Foucault 1976, p.173), he was talking about the present: its discontinuity with history and the limits it imposes on us. As he said in *Security, Territory, Population*, Western man has learned what no Ancient Greek could have: to be governed as a population of living beings, as a biological multiplicity (Foucault

2004a, p.159). If the diagnosis surrounding the present seeks to wreck the play of recognition and need, those two famous passages imply that there is no need whatsoever in the biopolitical experience of the present; it is not about the teleological unfolding of an origin, but about chance and forces. But, for that very reason, we must critically and historically question the ways in which life has been and continues to be put at risk in Western modernity through certain mechanisms that produce and intensify life while, at the same time, destroying and annihilating it. It is precisely through the crack worked open by this questioning that it is possible to make our *present become other* and then ask ourselves: *How it is possible for us to become others? How is another politics of life possible?*

Bio-thanato-politics

After this necessary detour, we shall attempt to elucidate how the apparatuses in which life is put at risk in Western modernity typically function. In particular, we shall try to understand how *bios* and *thanatos*, paradoxically, are interwoven in our biopolitical present, the nature of that paradox, what diagram of forces makes that paradox possible, which apparatuses activate it, and what terms are mixed up in it.

The possibility of thinking of biopolitics as a paradoxical figure between life and death appears in Foucault's first commentaries on the subject and is frequently revisited thereafter. More precisely, starting with the lectures he gave in Rio de Janeiro in 1974, Foucault repeatedly pointed out the precise points at which this power to promote life was inverted into its deadly opposite: a policy of death. Using the terminology of both Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito, we could say that it is the imperceptible point of passage from biopolitics to thanatopolitics. The texts in which Foucault refers most specifically to that paradoxical structure are the 1976 lectures *Genealogy of Racism* and the book published that same year, *The Will to Knowledge*. In both cases, after describing the general transformation of technologies of power in the West from the seventeenth century, with the resultant emergence of a technology that serves to strengthen and manage life, he presents, as he had already done in 1974, the contradiction inherent in that technology, which has simultaneously proven to be thoroughly deadly. Occasionally, biopower is contemporary

and complementary not only to the bloodiest wars, but also to the most horrific genocides.

Indeed, although it is considered that *genocides* have existed since the start of our era, genocide – as a legal concept and as an overdetermined signifier in politics – has emerged between the margins that indicate the Armenian and Jewish genocides, and is therefore entirely modern and belongs irreducibly to biopolitical modernity. Even though the ethico-political stain of the Armenian genocide did not reach the scale of the Jewish genocide, at that time already, through the law, the possibility of punishment was thought up under the (specially created) concept of *crimes against humanity*. However, this concept soon demonstrated its legal-political roots in the Nuremberg Trials. If laws are born from battles, massacres, charred cities, devastated lands, in other words, from the pure space where forces clash, the figures of *crimes against humanity* and *genocide* correspond immanently to the biopolitical forces diagram.²

Therefore, if we recall the distinction between the sovereign power of *letting live and making die* and the biopower of *making live and letting die*, that is, between a power of consuming and devouring the bodies and life of subjects, and a power of producing and safeguarding life, a question arises about death and the ways in which death can be organised in biopolitical modernity: how was biopower able to set up monstrous *factories of death*?

On this point, Foucault observes that such a formidable power to bring death seems, above all, to be the complement of a power that is exerted positively over life (Foucault 1976, p.165). That is to say, the power to bring death is not a simple parallel, but reflects a *complementarity* that contributes to the strength of biopower. It is a paradoxical structure: it is this same power to *make live* that can and *needs to make die*, and to do so on an unlimited scale.

Following the Foucauldian distinction between the deadly power of the sovereign and the modern biopower, one could suggest that we are seeing a reappearance of the murderous sovereign: a “phantasmagoric reappearance of the sovereign”, as Esposito (2004, p.36) proposes. However, the reappearance is delusive, perhaps only an optical illusion created by Foucault’s text and his constant contrasts with sovereign power. Perhaps it is not a reappearance but just that political philosophy has

not yet managed to cut the sovereign’s throat, take out the king’s eyes (Ogilvie 2007, p.92). It is more a question – following Foucault’s suggestion – of thinking that it is *death* itself that enters the historic future. A reading of Foucault allows us to question the possibility of thinking about death in the biopolitical context under the phantasmagorical figure of the sovereign decapitated in the great revolution. On that subject, Foucault said in *The Will to Knowledge* that “wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended”, on the contrary, they are waged on behalf of the population and its survival: “It is as managers of life and survival . . . that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed” (Foucault 1976, p.165).

The fact that this power of death, the *death-bringing power*, is not exercised on behalf of the sovereign means precisely that it does not establish a power relationship between *death* and *sovereignty*. Death is no longer the torture of Damians, which represents and increases the devouring power of the sovereign, it is a strictly *biopolitical* death. It is not about the play between two political bodies, the sovereign and the convict, but about a single body, that of the population, and certain mechanisms of power that are immanent to it. In this sense: “massacres have become vital” (Foucault 1976, p.165). Biopolitics taken to the extreme of its paradox establishes a positive relationship between *death* and *life*, between death and the power of life. Death has become *vital*. Therefore, it is in the name of life and the survival of the population that the power to impose death can and has been exercised in modernity.

In the lectures Foucault gave in 1976, he asserted that *racism* – biological State racism – is the condition that allows the right to cause death to be exercised in biopolitical modernity. This conclusion is similar to the one he reached in his talks on the *Abnormal* in 1975. It is precisely biological or biomedical racism that appears as a condition of a biopolitical death. Occasionally, this has the function of introducing a caesura in the living *continuum* that biopower took over: the gap between what should live and what should die. This caesura was only possible after the appearance of races in the biological continuum of the human species (Foucault 1997, p.230). There we have the first function of racism: to fragment biology with the appearance of races, distinguish, hierarchise, determine who is inferior and who is superior, and so

on. It is a biological *normalisation* that, in the terms of the doctors of the Nazi regime, seeks to demarcate the caesura around a “*lebensunwertes Leben*”, a “life unworthy of life” (Agamben 1995).

On that subject, Agamben has suggested that we see in this caesura and in the resultant figure of the “*lebensunwertes Leben*” the fundamental biopolitical structure of modernity. This caesura between one life that is worthy of life and another that is unworthy (*unwertes*), as it is a *life without vital value*, makes it possible – as was the objective of the Nazi doctors – to set a threshold beyond which a life can be eliminated without the act legally constituting a murder or sacrifice. Irrespective of the legal-political problem raised by Agamben, it is interesting to highlight the condition of the unworthy life of the “degenerates”, “abnormals”, “imbeciles”, etc. towards whom the theoretical efforts of the Nazi doctors were aimed, given that, as the title of K. Binding and A. Hoche’s work reveals, the aim was to *annihilate them, eliminate them*: “*Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens*”. The meaning of *Vernichtung* here is very different to simply *kill*, implying instead a complete destruction similar to that expressed by the Latin verbs *annihilare* and *exterminare*. Giorgio Agamben’s refusal to use the term *holocaust* to refer to the extermination of the Jews should be understood in this way, since they were eliminated not in a delirious holocaust “but, literally, as Hitler had announced, ‘like lice’ . . . The scale at which the extermination took place is neither religion nor law, but biopolitics” (Agamben 1995, p.147). The aim is to avoid shrouding the extermination of the Jews in a sacrificial aura and to understand that their *life without vital value* was thought of as mere biological data, like a biological hazard, and eliminated as such. In other words, the Jews were annihilated, exterminated like a bacteria through a process of *Desinfektion* of the population through “public hygiene” or, as the Nazis called it, “*Rassenhygiene*” (“*racial hygiene*”).

However, Foucault highlighted a second, even more crucial, function of *racism* according to the deadly strategy of biopolitics: *racism* made it possible to establish a positive relationship between death and life that posits that: “the more you let die, the more you will live” (Foucault 1997, p.230). Although this positive relationship seems typically bellicose, racism managed to bring it back to a strictly biological level. That bio-racial relationship states that: “the more inferior species die out,

the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I – as species rather than individual – can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate” (Foucault 1997, p.231).

It is a positive relationship between the death of the “degenerate”, the “abnormal” – basically, the “sub-race” – and life, the good, wholesome and healthy way of life. There is no war because there are no adversaries. The object of annihilation, the Other of biopolitics, is not an adversary or enemy, nor a *hostis* or *barbarus*, but rather that which marks the caesura in the biological *continuum* of the human species: an *external* or *internal* threat to the population and its life. Thus, biopolitics does not kill, but “exterminates biological threats” (*vernichtet*) and therefore *directly* produces and strengthens life.

According to Foucault, therefore, the most murderous States of our modernity will be the most racist. A very clear example of this is provided by Nazism, which is “the paroxysmal development of the new mechanisms of power” (Foucault 1997, p.233). Indeed, the *Nazi* State seized control of the biological aspect of society, the whole cycle of the *ghenos*, procreation and heredity, illness and accidents, on an ever-increasing scale, while at the same time unleashing formidable deadly power. On this subject, Foucault pointed out that, since the emergence of biopower, when States have imposed death, they have had to view it through the prism of biologism and, particularly, evolutionism. It has only been possible for States to “update” death through *racism* and its dual functions.

However, the strength of the bio-thanatopolitics paradox is greater than that: is not only about an external biological other; biopower introjects the racial other, the “sub-race” and analyses the whole *population*, exposing it to the ultimate danger of death. Death is the only route to proposing the building of a “supra-race”, a saved humanity, a superior life-form. Through *inoculation* against death itself, the population becomes healthier and death emerges as the threshold of *regeneration*. That is the ultimate meaning of a biopower for which killing has become essential and that is the key that Foucault offers to interpret the most *suicidal* moment of the Nazi regime: the order issued in April 1945 to eliminate the conditions of life of the German people themselves. At that moment, biopower becomes completely con-

sistent with a power to bring death and the whole biological *continuum* that falls within the sights of that power is placed at risk of death.

However, we should not lose sight of Foucault's statement regarding the fact that the genocide and suicide planned and perpetuated by the Nazi regime should be understood as the paroxysmal point of a series of apparatuses and mechanisms that precede it, which are part of its *origin*: this play is actually incorporated into the functioning of all modern States (Foucault 1997). So, we must be aware that the paradox of biopolitics, its thanatological becoming, is not only inherent in the Nazi regime, but also, regrettably, in a general technology of power; Nazism is just one of its possible terrible faces. That prompts us to think about the biopolitical apparatuses and mechanisms through which life is put at risk today.

Autoimmunity

Autoimmunity is the concept that has been taken up by Roberto Esposito. The Italian philosopher has approached the question of biopolitics by closely following Foucault's intermittent reflections.

In relation to the thanatological becoming of biopolitics, Esposito has attempted to position himself at a fluctuating distance from Foucault, maintaining that there is ambivalence in Foucault's interpretation of the term *biopolitics*. In other words, if the term is understood to mean a "politics of life", Esposito considers that it is unclear whether the phrase should be read in the sense of the objective or subjective genitive. The term *biopolitics* can be interpreted as both a politics of (*della*) life and a politics on (*sulla*) life. For Esposito, this semantic gap or snag in Foucault's term is highly problematic. Either biopolitics has an *affirmative* effect, it is a politics of life that strengthens life, or it has a *negative* effect, in which case it is a politics on life, limiting it, constricting it and ultimately killing it. Esposito suggests a series of consequences about the scope of Foucault's understanding of biopolitics; however, perhaps more interesting is his proposal to dissociate himself from those complications. His proposal is to examine biopolitics through the prism of what he has called the *immunity paradigm* (Esposito 2002). This *paradigm* has enabled him, first of all, to overcome the irreducible distance that he considers exists in Foucault between the

two elements of the notion of *bio-politics* since, from this perspective, life does not appear to be "at stake" in a politics from a certain moment, but rather there is no power outside of life and life does not occur outside of power. Politics is, therefore, *the instrument for keeping life alive* (Esposito 2004, p.42). Consequently, as it establishes an intrinsic relationship between life and power, the concept of *immunisation* makes it possible to overcome or suspend the choice between a power that preserves and strengthens life and a power that destroys and denies life. These two variations of the *life/power* relationship are articulated internally in such a way that a negative relationship can be established between both. As expressed by the notion of *immunity, negation*, the negative variation, is the way life is *preserved* and develops through power. In this *immunitary paradigm*, we have the possibility of approaching the question of biopolitics in such a way that the ambiguity or fluctuation between a *positive* derivation and a *negative* one is tied to a single mechanism: immunisation. Immunisation both protects and denies life: *it protects life by denying it*.

In turn, according to Esposito's reasoning, via the notion of *immunity* it is possible to clear up a second ambiguity in Foucault's interpretation, namely the relationship between modernity and biopolitics, as the immunisation approach allows biopolitics to be inserted into a historically determined grid (Esposito 2004, p.49). Thus, it can be acknowledged that life and power have been inextricably linked since antiquity; for example, in the power of the despot over the slave or the power of life and death of the *paterfamilias* over his children; but similarly, it can be acknowledged that *immunity* in the strict sense is absent from those relationships, as the connotation of immunity is entirely modern.

Beyond the two Foucauldian ambiguities that Esposito seeks to clear up, the interesting thing about his proposal is that the figure of *immunitas* provides an opportunity to question Foucault's biopolitics in such a way that its structure can be thought of as paradoxical, while also separating it from the necessary relationship with *racism* as presented above. This seems possible given that, as that figure emphasises the contradictory play between the *protection* and *negation of life*, it demonstrates how biopolitics can produce and strengthen life while at the same time denying and destroying it. By articulating the ambivalence that

seemed insurmountable in the concepts of biopolitics, it becomes possible to understand something like the dual status of a power that in modernity cultivates life and death, the *paradox of biopolitics* or the *thanatological becoming of biopolitics*.

The notion of *immunity* as a figure for thinking about political modernity had already been introduced by Jacques Derrida. To be precise, Derrida was not as interested in the concept of immunity as in the more complex concept of *autoimmunity*: the terrifying and fatal logic of autoimmunity. Indeed, Derrida returned to this logic as a framework of analysis to interpret the *horrific* events of 9/11, the attack against the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. Analysing those events, Derrida noted that an autoimmune process is a mechanism of the living being that “in an almost *suicidal* manner, tries to destroy ‘itself’, its own protections, to gain immunity *against* ‘its own’ immunity” (Derrida 2003, p.142). In this sense, for Derrida, 9/11 was the symptom of an autoimmune crisis and he proposes viewing politics itself within this logic.

Esposito has traced the origins of the notion of immunity, identifying one archaic aspect and another modern aspect; the latter is bio-medicine. From this point of view, immunity should be understood as the refractoriness of an organism to the danger of contracting a contagious disease (Esposito 2002, p.16). The important thing about this second, modern aspect is the change that leads from “natural” immunity to an “acquired” or actively produced immunity; in other words, the immunity that is produced by the inoculation of the antigen, a non-lethal amount of the virus that generates the antibody required to neutralise the real manifestation of the disease. This means that the mechanism presupposes the existence of evil (the disease), treating it as a piece of *data*, not only in the sense that from it is derived the very need for immunisation, but also in the sense that the immunisation acts through its use, reproducing (in a controlled manner) the *evil* against which it seeks to protect itself.

There we have the terms involved in this logic that both protects and denies life. This logic does not act by excluding evil – in a terminology more similar to *security mechanisms*, of *risk* or *danger* – but through a *neutralisation*, in the sense that the immune system takes on whatever is threatening it, without expelling it, but rather introjecting it, giving rise to an excluding inclusion or an inclusive

exclusion: “poison is not defeated by the organism when it is expelled by the body, but when it somehow becomes part of it” (Esposito 2002, p.18). Like in *homeopathic* medicine (*similia similibus curantur*), the “disease” itself is the cure, so the “disease” is included to exclude it or, upon excluding it, it becomes necessary to include it. Thus, if biopolitics ultimately wants to strengthen life, prolonging it and forestalling death – in other words, if its aim is to prevent death in order to strengthen life – the introduction of death is always necessary. *Death as an antigen is essential and is included through its own exclusion*. As in the Ancient Greek *pharmakós*, for immunisation, death is both a *cure* and a *poison*.

However, that already deadly logic can become even more radicalised and it is precisely this point of radicalisation that Derrida pointed out when he drew attention to the *immunisation of immunisation*, that is, the *autoimmune crisis*. Diseases referred to as “autoimmune” do not involve a blocking or failure of the immune mechanism, an immunodeficiency, but rather its turning on itself (its *suicide*), an *excessive* immune response that unfurls and then closes in on itself. It can be said that the *immunitary* mechanism supposes the externality of both evil, the *risk* or *danger*, and the antigen; conversely, the *autoimmunitary* mechanism recognises *in itself* the danger against which it must protect itself and which it must deny and destroy. Obviously, we can say (as immunologists do) that the former mechanism is a defence strategy against an *external enemy*. What is absent from the latter mechanism is clearly the idea of externality: “There is no passage from outside to inside: the inside fights against itself until it self-destructs” (Esposito 2004, p.232).

However, the difference between immunity and autoimmunity is not so clear; rather, they are linked by a deep relationship and autoimmunity is no more than a radicalisation of immunity. When the immune system turns on itself, it is not an *exceptional* malfunction of the *normal* immune mechanism, but the normal tendency of any immune system: *the normality (of the immune system) is (autoimmune) crisis*. On this subject, Esposito considers that the figure of autoimmunity was already implicit in the homeopathic principle of the concurrence of cure and poison which, in turn, had been put forward by Derrida when he asserted that *pharmakon* was the old name for the logic of autoimmunity. As the logic of immunity

always involves the incorporation of the negative, the phenomenon of autoimmunity is its confirmation and radicalisation: “the destruction, through self-destruction, of the entire body it is intended to defend” (Esposito 2004, p.234).

Thus, as the figure of immunity emphasises the contradictory play between the *protection* and *negation of life*, it enables an analysis of the paradoxical structure of biopolitics (and therefore of death, mass annihilation, *Vernichtung*), not so much as a thanatological *exception* of biopolitics, but as its mirror image. *The rule* of a power that preserves life *is the exception* that annihilates it. In the biopolitical and immune mechanism, life is gambled on the margins of two types or faces of death: that which must be avoided and that which must necessarily occur. Think, for example, of the Nazi regime’s terrible conception of genocide as a therapy. There, death was both remedy and poison. If what one seeks to eliminate is precisely that Great Death that corrodes the individual or social organism from within, causes degeneration, anomalies, etc., one must respond by eliminating it. *The delirious dream of the immunitary mechanism: kill Death to ensure life, to ensure survival.* Nazism, closely tied to this double death and its infinite echoes, was crushed in its own cogs; it pushed its immune mechanism to the point that it became *suicidal*, turning on itself, pulling itself into the implacable logic of *autoimmunity*. As Foucault pointed out back in 1976, it was no longer just part of the population or biological *continuum* that had to be exposed to the holy fire of death, but the very life of the whole population; it was exposed to death as a principle of *regeneration* in a monstrous *autoimmune* crisis.

Security mechanisms

All these paradoxical actions of the immune system have remained on the margins of Foucault’s argument about the two functions of *racism* in biopolitical modernity: breaking up the biological continuum and establishing a direct relationship between life and death; first, between one’s own life and the death of the biological other, a moment of immunity and homicide; and then, between one’s own life and one’s own death, a moment of autoimmunity and suicide.

However, our digression to explore the workings of immunity and autoimmunity has allowed us to get closer to the *bio-thanato-political paradox*

that Foucault referred to repeatedly from 1974 (in *positive iatrogenesis*, *degeneration theory*, the *Nazi regime*, etc.), without the need to rely on the notion of *racism*. In other words, it enables us to describe the functioning of a general technology of power, beyond its specific bases, its individual apparatuses, its particular ways of updating itself.

For the purposes of this article, that is the value of the figure of immunity. However, the authors who have analysed that figure have largely overlooked the lecture given by Foucault in 1978, entitled *Security, Territory, Population*.³ This absence is problematic as, in view of all the foregoing, we can ask ourselves whether what Foucault calls *security mechanisms* in the lectures might already describe the figure of an *immunitary machine*, derived from racism as a specific apparatus. If we think of *inoculation*, *variola*, and *vaccination*, especially, it is clear that they are mechanisms of power that perform the function which, in Esposito’s terms, we have called the *immunitary* function.

Foucault, precisely, points out that variolation and vaccination integrate and intersect with the other security mechanisms through a type of *structural analogy*, a type of typical morphology. As we know, variolation “did not seek to prevent smallpox but, on the contrary, cause smallpox in inoculated individuals, but under such conditions that cancellation could happen at the very moment of a vaccination which did not result in a full-blown disease” (Foucault 2004a, p.79). According to Foucault, this logic is illustrative of the functioning of all security mechanisms. What, then, is this *typical morphology* that encompasses mechanisms ranging from vaccination to the economic governance of scarcity by physiocrats? What structural analogy exists between mechanisms that artificially produce a “small disease” in the population, introducing a small evil into it, a dose of death in life itself, in order to *prevent* a possible full-blown disease, in order to safeguard life from disease and death, and those other economic/political mechanisms that seek to tackle the problems of scarcity and a hungry population? That typical morphology is the morphology created by the articulation that excludes the negative element of the relationship through its inclusion, a mechanism that does not operate by means of *simple exclusion* but through neutralisation, an *inclusive exclusion*. It is this morphology that, detached from any base, operates in each of the *security mechanisms*, co-opts each of

those specific apparatuses, both at the biomedical level of variolation and at the economic/political level of physiocratic mechanisms. In effect, the physiocrats tried to find in the very phenomenon of scarcity the conditions for it to cancel itself (Foucault 2004a, p.79).

If the *sovereign* tried to prevent leprosy by excluding lepers and to pass laws banning hunger, if the *disciplines* sought to curb the spread of the plague by curing the sick or monitoring contagion and to eliminate scarcity by regulating transactions *ad infinitum*, *security mechanisms*, on the other hand, excluded the updating of *scarcity*, introducing *hunger* among the “people” (*non-lethal dose of scarcity*) and excluded the smallpox epidemic by introducing the smallpox virus into the whole population (in *non-lethal doses*). *Security mechanisms* safeguard the population against a phenomenon; they *exclude* it through itself, through its *inclusion*, so that the phenomenon cancels itself; they neutralise it. According to Esposito, this is an *immunological* and *homeopathic* therapy; however, in Foucault’s terms, it is not only *death* that unfurls like the Greek *pharmakon*, but each of the *phenomena* that are *neutralised* by the security mechanisms.

This typical morphology, which may be found to different degrees in each of the mechanisms and apparatuses in which the population and its phenomena are put at stake, defines the abstract form in which a general technology of power operates, the abstract and frictionless machinery of power. We could call it an *immunitary machine*, in the sense that Esposito refers to the *immunity paradigm*; however, adopting that approach could have the effect not only of giving the analysis great precision regarding the way these mechanisms function, but also of limiting them to certain very particular phenomena. So, maybe it is worth keeping the Foucauldian concept of *security mechanisms*, which expresses this “logic of immunity” and more.

Indeed, the lectures given by Foucault in 1978 reveal a painstaking analysis of the functioning of the *bio-thanato-political paradox* that these security mechanisms involve and of the whole logic of safeguarding (and immunity), without associating it with any particular base. In those lectures, *racism* no longer appears as a necessary element for updating the death-bringing function in a biopolitical context. The safeguarding mechanisms – the physiocratic anti-scarcity apparatus,

inoculation, etc. – do not need it as a technique and strategy that, in its dual function, makes it possible to put into practice the function of death. *Death-bringing power is already a presupposition of the mechanisms themselves*. As security mechanisms take the population as both a means and end, they can use the population and its biological phenomena as an instrument. Thus, physiocratic thought introduced a caesura between the relevant level and the irrelevant or non-instrumental level of the population (the “people”), fragmenting the *continuum* of the population without that necessarily supposing a bellicose or racial logic, rather a strictly biopolitical logic: hunger and its lethal effect on the “people” were necessary to safeguard the life of the “population” (Foucault 2004a, pp.66–68).

Let us see, now, how inoculation was theoretically justified in the eighteenth century by Daniel Bernoulli, who asserted in his *Essai d’une nouvelle analyse de la mortalité*, in 1766, that: “if inoculation is adopted, the result will be a gain of several thousand people; although it is deadly, as it kills children in the cradle, it is preferable to smallpox which causes the death of adults who have become useful to society; while it is true that the generalisation of inoculation risks replacing the great epidemics with a permanent state of endemic disease, the danger is less because smallpox is a generalised eruption and inoculation affects only a small part of the surface of the skin” (*apud* Foucault 2004a, pp.67–68). A whole logic of immunity can be seen clearly in this argument. Just as inoculation only affects a portion of the skin’s surface and smallpox the whole body, with statistical arguments (a fundamental technique of biopolitics), it can be said that the inoculated disease affects a small proportion of the population, children, whereas smallpox affects the whole population, including its strong and useful elements. Thus, the mechanism generates, as in the case of scarcity, the definition of a caesura in the *continuum* of the population and establishes a direct relationship between its death and life; a relationship between the life of the population as an objective and death. This death is both the Great Death that must be eliminated and the smaller-scale (controlled and contained) death that must be instrumentalised. When this whole game is put in series of series, that is, in statistics and probabilities, as security mechanisms do, there will be certain levels of deaths, diseases and accidents that are normal for each (age, geographical,

occupational, etc.) series and infinitesimal general and specific caesuras will proliferate around the population, transformed into an objective and an instrument of biopolitics.

According to Foucault, it is not only life and death that are at play in these mechanisms, but a series of phenomena concerning the population; life is just one of those phenomena, albeit the most important one. Everything that *denies* and *strengthens* the population is at play; anything that means *risk*, *danger* (scarcity, miasmas from cities, disease, death, accidents, etc.), but that, when deployed against itself, can neutralise itself, exclude itself inclusively. Every danger, every new object or range of objects that the security mechanisms highlight in reality, rendering it visible and expressible, identifying it as a hazard, is, each time, a singular *pharmakon*, a *danger* that, through the safeguarding procedures, can also be its own *cure*. In this way, the bio-thanato-political paradox clearly ramifies into each security apparatus, breaking open the narrow limits of racism: whenever an apparatus is proposed to protect the population from any risk, there will be an apparatus designed to fragment the *continuum* of the population and define the relevant level and the purely instrumental level.

However, for Foucault, the expansion of biopolitics through this figure, which has as its poles the *population* and *security mechanisms*, gave rise to the need to abandon or, at least, redefine the notion.⁴ *Biopolitics* gradually opens the way for a genealogy of the *ways of governing populations* (*Polizei, raison d'état*, Christian pastoral work), which ties in with a long presence of the theme of governance in Foucault (government of the insane, of children, etc.), and eventually leads him to pose the question of *governmentality*. However, if its redefinition is preferable to its abandonment, these last shifts should be taken into account given that they enable a retrospective reading of the development of the notion in Foucault and are essential to understand current biopolitical mechanisms. On this point, we believe that the lack of interest in the immunity reading in these shifts gives rise to misunderstandings.

Thus, if we are to continue the reflection on biopolitics, in view of the aforementioned shifts, it becomes more difficult to bring biopolitics back to its relationship with something like “life”, whether understood as *zoe* or as *bios*. Rather, it seems more accurate to examine the link between the *bios* of bio-politics and *population* in the modern

knowledge/power complex, which is the framework within which Foucault presents the birth of biopower. If biology cannot be thought of before Cuvier (Foucault 1966), population is not a scientific problem before Darwin. In other words, in order to understand the scientific rationality of biopolitics, it is useful to bear in mind these two events in the history of science. *Life* was neither *expressible* nor *visible* to the classical *episteme*: “historians want to write histories of biology in the eighteenth century, but they do not realize that biology did not exist then. . . . And that, if biology was unknown, there was a very simple reason for it: *that life itself did not exist*” (Foucault 1966, p.128). All that existed were *living beings* in the series of all creatures that form Universal Harmony. Life became a fundamental problem at the end of the eighteenth century, when a new configuration overturned the old space of *natural history* once and for all, giving Life a whole new autonomy that had not existed previously. Once the ideas of need, continuity, and harmony in the living world had been rejected, everything came together to demonstrate the contingency of living beings and their formation. Thus, evolution theory liberated the living world from all transcendence and any factor that could not be known. But, what was that object of knowledge for Darwin? It was no longer living individuals, given that the laws of variation and evolution cannot be deduced from them alone, but rather the *population*, as only the *totality of the organisms that live and succeed each other in time* was of interest. Even though individuals are all that exists, the classification of living forms is based only on *types*, series of individuals, all of them different, summarised into an average.⁵ Only those types have a strictly *biological reality* and, taken to its extreme, that means: *only the population lives*. In parallel, although all individual variations are possible and are only put to the test after they have appeared in a given *environment*, the *struggle for existence* is no more than a *struggle for reproduction*, the continuation of the type through differential reproduction rates. In this way, evolution theory – with the *population* as its biological reality, *statistics* as its method of analysis, the *environment* as the space for natural selection – sets out all the elements of a scientific and political rationality that is decisive for the analysis of modern biopolitics. Schematically then, it can be said that, after the appearance of evolutionism, biopolitics was located between the *environment* and

the *population*, insofar as alteration of the environment gives rise to the modification of types, that is, of the population and consequently the organism. On this subject, in the lectures he gave in 1976, Foucault said: “Bio-politics deals with the population. More precisely: with population as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” (Foucault 1976, p.254).

The current discussion of biopolitics seems to disregard the ruptures pointed out by the archaeology of knowledge that Foucault never abandoned, but systematically recommenced in the light of his genealogical research. However, we consider that biopolitics should be questioned through the coupling of knowledge and power. In this way, it can be understood why Foucault’s evasion of a definition of the notion of “life”, which Esposito identifies as a problematic absence, might in fact have been a deliberate omission. This omission contrasts with Foucault’s emphasis on population and his numerous attempts in pursuit of an archaeology, of its sudden appearance in the disposition of knowledge and a genealogy of its emergence in the apparatuses of power. Therefore, however much the question of the population ultimately involves, for Foucault, thinking – beyond biopolitics – about the figure of modern governmentality, retrospectively, there is no avoiding the fact that the *bios* of bio-politics refers to the *population* because, within the framework of the modern knowledge-power, life is only real as a phenomenon of a population.

By maintaining this reference, one can understand the modern specificity of biopolitics, its increasingly broad expansion into a series of apparatuses that are unrelated but isomorphic in terms of their security rationality; with them, it becomes possible to make out the features of today’s biopolitical apparatuses. With regard to this last point,

succinctly, it can be stated that since the technical and epistemological development of the life sciences in the twentieth century, it has become less and less common for present-day biopolitical mechanisms to be located between the environment and the population, but increasingly common for them to be located in a new dimension which is a result of those transformations. Therefore, if we have stressed the need to understand that, in the historical framework that Foucault assigns to biopolitics, the population is both the object of knowledge and the target of power, it is in order to be able to understand that transformations are currently occurring; indeed, the techniques of contemporary biology (e.g., *genetics*) entail a redefinition of *life* and *the living*, and therefore of biopolitics. These techniques operate in a dimension prior to selection, as they can alter the *programme* of a living being before it appears in a given environment and they no longer need to operate on the environment as a way of accessing the organism. Thus, it is neither the individual nor the population nor the individual and his or her descendants, but a new dimension of life that is at stake in contemporary biopolitical apparatuses. Obviously, that does not mean that the mechanisms that Foucault described and whose paradoxical logic we have attempted to present in this paper have become obsolete; on the contrary, the terrible scene of entire populations that have become dispensable and disposable proves that, nowadays, biopolitical apparatuses operate with such greater force than in the past that they are both reinforced and complicated by new mechanisms that superimpose and attach themselves to those that already exist. Investigating what new biopolitical mechanisms are operating in the biomolecular dimension of life, how they combine with modern security mechanisms and with what specific logics they do so, is the challenge that must be tackled.

Notes

1. All references correspond to the Spanish editions.

2. One particular person is behind the specific concept of genocide: Raphael Lemkin. Moreover, the birth of the concept can be pre-

cisely dated: after Churchill’s statement in 1941 that the crime being perpetrated by the Nazis was “a crime that has no name”, Lemkin set about giving a name to the nameless, and in 1943 coined the term “genocide” (Lemkin 1933).

3. Although Esposito did not refer to the 1978 lectures in his works dedicated to the question of biopolitics, in his prologue to the book *Il governo delle vite: Biopolitica ed economia* by Laura Bazzicalupo, he paid considerable attention to them

and stressed the importance of their content (Bazzicalupo 2006).

4. In both *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault promises to address the theme of biopolitics, but always with new detours. In the first, understanding biopolitics

meant understanding safeguarding mechanisms and modern governmentality; in the second, despite its title, biopolitics was discussed even less. However, regarding the second, Foucault said that only by understanding neoliberal governmentality can we understand the meaning of biopolitics. Therefore,

the lectures focused on the political rationality of neoliberalism in its different versions (Foucault 2004b, p.217).

5. Thus, we see clearly that with evolutionism, biology has become a sort of statistics.

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