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On Biopolitics: Editorial

Vulnerable Paths to Freedom

We embarked on editing the issue 'On Biopolitics' in the middle of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic outbreak. The management of the pandemic caused drastic shifts in our lives and activated just as drastic a shift in how we thought about governance, power and freedom. The pandemic, and the ways we reacted to the invisible threat of a virus, raised key questions concerning the nature and limits of the ethical responsibility of the state, the extent and limitations of our democracies, of the arts and particularly the theatre, but also concerning human dignity in a suffocating world of increasing state surveillance. Suddenly, Michel Foucault's concept of biopower (2003a) reverberated with a sharper meaning, just as Giorgio Agamben's visions of a State of Exception (2005) unfolded in front of our very eyes. As we were more forcefully confronted with the eternal tension between utilitarianism and libertarianism, a multitude of issues deserved a closer look in the face of the radicalization of the governance of life and death.

Foucault coined the term biopower in the 1970s as part of his enquiries into how various disciplinary techniques directed at training the body provide the basis of the governing power to manage life. Locating the political shift in the eighteenth century, Foucault analysed how it became possible to manage a population through the development of new rational and demographic techniques aimed at measuring, classifying and managing the immanent characteristics of a given population and territory. As Alex Means explains, biopower emerges out of 'new statistical tools and metrics such as birth rates, death rates, census tracts, agricultural outputs and inputs, and figures concerning pestilence, disease, deviancy, and pauperism' (2022: 1). Biopolitics thus turned populations

into a field of visibility and intervention which, in turn, meant that populations and subjects came to understand themselves and their actions through these contingent and arbitrary statistical categories, including classification schemas

that became associated with 19th and 20th century racial taxonomies, colonialism, genocide, and warfare. (Means 2022: 1)

In this respect, the issue comprises of texts addressing specific performative contexts of biopolitical strategies of spatial control and their effects on subject-formation. Ece Konuk and V. Şafak Uysal reflect on the historical stratification of political ideologies in the management of the performative frameworks of a park in Istanbul. Marc Villanueva Mir scrutinizes the performativity of policing as a producer of movement in the context of protests. Moira Lewitt problematizes the moral complexity of the UK government's management of the pandemic.

In the twentieth-first century, especially seen in currently managing the pandemic, we have been confronted with the biopolitical use of medicine, what Foucault (2003b [1973]) named the 'medical gaze' (9). Foucault developed this concept in The Birth of the Clinic (1973) by which he analysed the practice of modern medicine as a disciplinary technique of biopolitical management. Focusing on the patient–doctor relation, he argued that medical practice – far from simply relying on an objective and rational view of the body, life and death – continued to underpin the exercise of power relations that suited the ruling class (ibid.). As this power became the basis for the institutionalization of scientific knowledge, the patient's body became objectified and dehumanized by separating and ignoring its identity. Since part of modern medicine's novelty was the distribution of healthcare to the whole population (rather than just the ruling classes as was the case in prior times), then the medical gaze – 'the eye that governs' (Foucault 2003: 89) – 'isolated, probed, analysed, examined, and classified' (Hancock 2018: 443) entire populations. Thus, the significance of Foucault's conception of medicine is in seeing it as an instrument of social control with critical consequences on the subject-formation of the people.

For some of Foucault's contemporaries of the 1970s, the social control that medicine exerted on subject formation of populations was seen as a threat to democratic freedom. For instance, the sociologist Irving Kenneth Zola (1972) denounced the "medicalizing" ... of daily living ... rooted in our increasingly complex technological and bureaucratic system ... making medicine and the labels "healthy" and "ill" relevant to an ever increasing part of human existence' (487). Similarly, the theologian Ivan Illich (1995 [1975]) criticized 'social overmedicalization [wherein] people accept health management designed on the engineering model, when they

conspire in an attempt to produce, as if it were a commodity, something called “better health (33–34). Illich’s warning against the erosion of ‘the potential of people to deal with their human weakness, vulnerability, and uniqueness in a personal and autonomous way’ (33) was also shared by the economist Jacques Attali. In 1979, Attali (1979a, 1979b) envisioned the development of medicalization into the determinant biopolitical process of a future technological world where ‘the concept of freedom itself will become perverted ... through medicine, through the good and the bad, through the link to death’ (1979b). Indeed, in this dystopian world of a hegemonic medical regime of governance, we would employ ourselves as direct instruments of ‘a new form of authoritarian society ... where each person “freely” desires to adhere to the norm ... for the purpose of freedom and autonomy’ (ibid.).

Our recent experience of prolonged quarantines, self-isolation measures, social distancing and the use of mask in public spaces can perhaps speak, as Attali believed, of such ‘a voluntary form of alienation to oneself that follows from a norm imposed from outside’ (ibid.). The call of public health to fight the COVID-19 pandemic by preventing exposure to the contagious SARS-CoV-2 virus validated the governmental measures. And yet, there is a need to remain vigilant to how extreme restrictions to freedom are being exercised or, indeed, justified. Not only perhaps because such restrictions may become detrimental to populations’ welfare in the long run. This is an argument currently debated in the various sectors of scientific, economic and philosophical thinking. But also, because societies at the mercy of measuring, correcting and disciplining techniques are only effectively normalized, at least so far, in dictatorships, and not in constitutional democracies

It is in this light that Agamben (2020), for instance, accused the management of the pandemic as being a form of political manipulation and argued that enforced lockdowns required the constant renewal of states of emergency as ‘the new normal art of governance’. Democracies and states of emergency stand on opposite poles for Agamben. But what the management of the coronavirus has shown, he explains, is that the state can and does totally control its populations if need be. In this respect, technologies of surveillance play a significant part to this end that is also profitable. As Gerald Delanty (2020) discusses,

governments are now employing digital programmes for mobile data tracking, apps to record personal contacts, CCTV [closed-circuit television] networks

equipped with facial recognition, the proposal of the UK government to use 'back-end' access into Bluetooth connections to enable contact tracing. These new technologies are creating lucrative new markets for the extraction, sale and analysis of private data. (Delanty 2020: 9)

Once again, we are curiously reminded of Attali's elaborated futurological predictions in which he conceived of the advent of a technologically sovereign global biopower he called the 'hyperclass' (2011: 195). These 'masters of the super-empire [-] the stars of the "circuses" and of the "theater companies"' would reign over populations that he named the 'hypernomads[:] several score millions of ... women as much as men, many self-employed, drifting from "theater" to circus ... neither employees nor employers, but sometimes filling several jobs at once, managing their lives like a stock portfolio' (ibid.). Attali's theatrical language is significant here and functions on two levels. First, it is on a metonymical level by which he indicates the role of the entertainment industries as key biopolitical instruments of the ruling class. Second, Attali's theatres and circuses are also metaphors for transient and precarious economic domains of labour, companies and products that constitute the lives of the population, on a par with the actor's polymorphic function where identities are borrowed but never owned. Thus, Attali's reference to these future populations as 'hypernomads' is to denote of their constant virtual mobility and a new mode of living entirely experienced via virtual bodies (hypernomads). The prefix hyper then situates the role of digital technologies as both a totalizing instrument of biopower's ruling class (hyperclass) and the cause of the abandonment of material bodies. In such a dystopian scenario, humans are transformed by a technologically authoritarian governing power, thus becoming 'transhuman' (Attali 2011: 260).

Attali's transhumanism is not uncommon in signalling a paradoxical form of anthropocentric Posthumanism since the transformation of the human through technology is considered here as serving the purpose of reinforcing human inequalities and hierarchies of oppression. Rosi Braidotti has critiqued such trends as 'neohumanist' (2018a) discourses because they fail to advance the dissolution of nature/culture and human/non-human dichotomies at the conception of Posthumanism (2018b). She argues against the Transhumanist view of technology as the sole constitutive basis for an emancipatory mutation of humanity precisely

because of its inclination towards a 'brutal ... geopolitics of labour' (ibid.). The same Posthuman predicament, she claims, can also be found in the 'Environmentalist' trend where a discursive 'machinery of anxiety' (ibid.) advocates for the total reframing and transformation of the human within a natural framework. Effectively abandoning human power and technology altogether, the environmentalist trend can be found in Bruno Latour's biopolitical proposal for a 'climatic regime' (2018) where the climate becomes the figure of biopolitical authority in the conception and management of human life. Here Latour describes human transformation by using the familiar narrative of Kafka's The Metamorphosis. For him, the transformation of Franz Kafka's locked-up protagonist into an insect is an allegorical account of the human adaptability to hostile, unliveable climatic conditions. Thus, Latour inverts the demise of Kafka's protagonist by celebrating his mutation as it is seen to point to a conception of human life that is protected from, and no longer contributing to, climatic disaster. Unsurprisingly then, during the SARS Cov2 pandemic, in a radio interview (2021), Latour rejoiced at the implementation of lockdowns, considering these to be disciplinary opportunities training us for a more 'generalized lockdown' that would be the basis of this 'climatic regime' (ibid.).

There is evidently an apparent opposition between Attali's transhumanism and Latour's environmentalist futures. And yet, they share deeply coercive and complementary biopolitical modes of living that reinforce human exceptionalism – that is, seeing humanity as a uniquely responsible and superior species. However, as Joshua Clover points out in his critique of Latour's futurology, the plundering of the environment 'is a consequence not of humans ... but of industrial production and its handmaidens, and only forces which can bring that to heel allow us to prepare for climate change' (2021). Indeed, in the face of the persistent destructive exploitation of the environment (Shiva 2016), Latour's optimism for a climatic regime of governance does not consider its potential economic instrumentalization. By contrast, Braidotti argues that the anthropocentrism of transhumanist and environmentalist discourses and practices maintains the 'political economy of advanced capitalism' by extending the power of 'repressive structures of dominant subject-formations (potestas)' and eroding further the power of 'the affirmative and transformative visions of the subject as nomadic process (potentia)' (2018a). In an effort to circumvent the 'normative neohumanism' (2018b) of these biopolitical proposals, Braidotti proposes that we need

to conceive of and mobilize the 'posthuman convergence' (2018a) of technology and the environment within a post-anthropocentric nomadism 'going beyond the human to escape oppression' (2018b).

Thus, Braidotti's post-anthropocentrism focuses on a positivist conception of the 'non-human, vital force of Life' that is 'zoe' (2013: 60). In this respect, she differs from Agamben's negative conception of life/zoe (1998), which is based on the claim that the inhumanity of life/zoe was the residue – the 'bare life' – of necropower's destruction (potestas) of the generative biopower (potentia) of humanity. Braidotti conceives of the self-organizing power of life/zoe as both 'threatening' and 'generative' (2013: 112), a two-fold force that, she argues, is manipulated by the destructive and affirmative facets of biopower. With the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, we have experienced the threatening side of life/zoe in the form of a highly contagious new virus perceived as destructive, deadly and catastrophic. Undoubtedly, the virus threatened important capitalist processes, and yet it was captured nonetheless by political and economic opportunities, based on new coercive forms of welfare management, and arguably leading to further reframing of democratic freedom in constituted modern democracies.

To understand the deeper implications of such a possible reframing of democratic freedom we need to be reminded of Foucault's discussion of biopower. As he argued, in exercising biopower, the governance's prior function 'to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it' (1990: 138). In other words, the biopolitical manipulation of life/zoe thus entailed that of death (necropower), which, as we have seen recently, has taken priority in the political response to the pandemic. For examples, we have seen how matters of health suddenly became the very basis upon which humans – now viewed as biohazardous containers – were reduced to carriers of deadly biological information invested with financial value (testing kits, vaccines, tracking technologies/apps and so forth). No longer just an unavoidable part of the fragile and unbalanced nature of life, what we experienced with the pandemic crisis was how death and destruction was being capitalized upon by a necropolitical economy, an economy that thrives on, and in effect brings further extremities and inequalities of wealth, regressions of human rights, suffering and oppression, wars and crises. Biopower, in this sense, has not only introduced the necropolitical

management of death and dying but also, as Achille Mbembe (2003) explains, its operation has become predicated on it. This is because the administration of death is now geopolitically and economically more profitable than the dimension of living.

So, if Foucault's concept of biopower remains a useful insight in highlighting the entanglement of the political management of life and death, it is no longer sufficient to attend to the ethical and political dimension of the growing necropolitical isomorphism between economic gains and the biological management of lives today. Bodies have become 'disposable', especially bodies and lives that signify difference and have been marginalized by necropower (Mbembe 2003: 27). Our current PR issue 'On Biopolitics' hopes to untangle some of those problematized aspects of biopower, offering essays that detail the necropolitical marginalization and stigmatization of bodies, as well as discussing critical tactics of resistance to it. In this spirit, Ryan Hartigan challenges the dichotomy of legality and the law typically through the uniquely ambiguous position and functions of a Māori institutional body in New Zealand. Nimalan Yoganathan explores a particular form of performative representation of black subjectivities as an alternative to normative images of blackness. Yizhou Huang analyses subversive digital choreographic practices as feminist critiques of the commodification of women's corpses in China. And Bojana Cvejić exposes radical tactics of necropolitical disavowal to rethink self-immolation as a political act of transindividuation.

If human lives are becoming increasingly expendable so, too, is the environment. Years of development in sustainable practices – albeit slow and frankly insufficient – were thrown out during the pandemic, leaving our streets scattered with disposable masks and used testing kits. Here, biopower's mortiferous anthropocentrism begins to stare us in the eyes: to protect ourselves in the present, the environment (and thus all lives) must pay a heavy price in the long term. There is an urgency then to rethink biopower, as Braidotti's post-anthropocentric ethics of power (2013) does, by dealing with a positive and vitalist understanding of life/zoe. A biopower based on the recognition that the forces that dictate life/zoe remain superior to human power (Rose 2014), also acknowledges that the vulnerability of life/zoe is intrinsically and vitally shared among all lives. Indeed, during the pandemic, walking our pets on the streets of locked-down cities devoid of traffic, breathing a cleaner air

and seeing wildlife occupying the urban spaces we had been used to saturating with noise and pollution gave us a taste of the affirmative force of life/zoe. At such a curious moment of delight and apprehension, and as we found ourselves more isolated and divided than ever (vaccinated/unvaccinated; pro-vaccine/anti-vaccine and so on), it seemed imperative to talk about biopolitics by tackling forms of control over, and generative freedom for, the vulnerable lives of all human and non-human beings alike. As Braidotti insists, the undeniable bond of vulnerability we all share is what requires us to reimagine biopower within a 'zoe-political' (2008) understanding of humanity as 'neither homo universalis nor Anthropos but a more complex embodied and embedded non-unitary, relational and affective transversal subject collaboratively linked to material web of human and non-human agents' (Braidotti 2018b).

The issue concludes with a series of texts dwelling on, and providing examples of, the affirmative vulnerability of a zoe-based ontological reframing of biopower. Anthony Kubiak reveals a transhistorical and transcultural lineage of connections between theatre and contagion to articulate the performative healing moment as a generative unfolding of shared and indeterminate vulnerabilities. Eylül Fidan Akıncı sets forth the choreographic development of an immunitary force acting as an affirmative biopower of public intimacy. Olga Timurgalieva attends to a dynamic relationship with bacterial matter that reconfigures biosecurity norms to emphasize relationality and observation, over anthropocentrism and surveillance. Stephen Loo critically meditates on the relationship between eating and thinking to offer alternative ontologies away from human exceptionalism. Andreas Løppenthin and Dorte Bjerre Jensen review a transgeographical performative score developed using video-conferencing technology and practically advancing a conception of togetherness as collage – rather than unity – in the context of physical distancing during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Graham Wolfe correlates the pandemic with that of a fictional pandemic decimating much of humanity to offer a psychotheological perspective on our changing relationship to theatre, work and labour. Lastly, but not least, Katerina Sotiriou and Eleni Timplalexi deal with the enslaving and destroying of animal life to reimagine biopower through radical care for the non-human.

Indeed, there are too many violent risks and destructive stakes at play with defining who/what lives and who/what does not as this issue wishes to show. We are thus positioning the question of power as a determinant matter in how we might

sustainably reconstitute ourselves and our relation to the world. If life and freedom are always already conceived in political terms, then the double-edge sword that is biopower formulates useful provocations to how life might be managed away from exceptionalist conceptions of the human. Given how the field of performance is exemplary in mirroring such conceptions, it therefore constitutes an area of primary importance through which we can destabilize, dismantle and regenerate power. To this end, the issue 'On Biopolitics' disseminates a panoply of critical voices on the biopolitical matters of our history, present and potential futures. At the intersection of politics, philosophy and performance, the following articles endeavour to problematize and overcome biopower's limitless urge to dominate, in the hope of finally paving vulnerable paths to freedom for all lives, human and non-human alike.

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