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# Geontologies: The Figures and the Tactics





For a long time many have believed that Western Europe spawned and then spread globally a regime of power best described as biopolitics. Biopolitics was thought to consist of a "set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power."[1] Many believe that this regime was inaugurated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and then consolidated during the 1970s. Prior to this, in the age of European kings, a very different formation of power, namely, sovereign power, reigned. Sovereign power was defined by the spectacular, public performance of the right to kill, to subtract life, and, in moments of regal generosity, to let live. It was a regime of sovereign thumbs, up or down, and enacted over the tortured, disemboweled, charred, and hacked bodies of humans – and sometimes of cats.[2] Royal power was not merely the claim of an absolute power over life. It was a carnival of death. The crowds gathered in a boisterous jamboree of killing – hawking wares, playing dice – not in reverent silence around the sanctity of life. Its figure, lavishly described at the opening of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, was the drawn-and-quartered regicide.

How different does that formation of power seem to how we conceive of legitimate power now, what we ask of it, and, in asking, what it creates? And how different do the figures seem through which the contemporary formation of power entails its power? We do not see kings and their subjects, or bodies hacked into pieces, but states and their populations, individuals and their management of health, the Malthusian couple, the hysterical woman, the perverse adult, and the masturbating child. Sure, some social formations seem to indicate a return to sovereign power, such as the US and European security states and their secret rendition centers created in the wake of 9/11, 7/7, 11-M (the Madrid train bombings), Charlie Hebdo ... But these manifestations of a new hard sovereign power are deeply insinuated in operations of biopower – through the stochastic rhythms of specific algorithms and experiments in social media – something Foucault anticipated in his lectures on security, territory, and population.[3] Is it such a wonder, then, that some believe a great divide separates the current regime of biopolitics from the ancient order of sovereignty? Or that some think that disciplinary power (with its figures of camps, barracks, and schools, and its regularization of life) and biopolitics (with its four figures of sexuality, its technological tracking of desire at the level of the individual and population, and its normation of life) arch their backs against this ancient savage sovereign

*dispositif*?

Foucault was hardly the first to notice the transformation of the form and rationale of power in the long history of Western Europe – and, insofar as it shaped the destinies of its imperial and colonial reach, power writ globally. Perhaps most famously, Hannah Arendt, writing nearly twenty years before Foucault would begin his lectures on biopower, bewailed the emergence of the "Social" as the referent and purpose of political activity.[4] Arendt did not contrast the era of European kings and courts to the modern focus on the social body, but rather she contrasted the latter to the classical Greek division between public and private realms. For Arendt the public was the space of political deliberation and action carved out of and defined by its freedom from and antagonism to the realm of necessity. The public was the active exclusion of the realm of necessity – everything having to do with the physical life of the body – and this exclusion constituted the public realm as such. For Arendt, the space of necessity began leaking into the public during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, creating a new topology of the public and private. She termed this new spacing "the Social." Rather than excluding bodily needs, wants, and desires from political thought, the liberal "Social" state embraced them, letting loose *homo economicus* to sack the public forum and establish itself as the raison d'être of the political. Ever since, the liberal state gains its legitimacy by demonstrating that it anticipates, protects, and enhances the biological and psychological needs, wants, and desires of its citizens.

If Foucault was not the first word on the subject of biopolitics he was also not the last. As lighthearted as his famous quip might have been that this century would bear the name "Deleuze," he would no doubt have been pleased to see the good race that his concept of the biopolitical has run, spawning numerous neologisms (biopower, biopolitics, thanatopolitical, necropolitics, positive and negative forms of biopower, neuropolitics) and spreading into anthropology, cultural and literary studies, political theory, critical philosophy, and history. Jacques Derrida and Donna Haraway would explore the concept of auto-immunity from the point of view of the biopolitical.[5] Giorgio Agamben would put Arendt and Foucault in conversation in order to stretch the origins of the emergence of the biopolitical back to Greek and Roman law.[6] Roberto Esposito would counter the negative readings of Agamben by arguing that a positive form of biopolitics could be found in innovative readings of Martin Heidegger, Georges Canguilhem, and Baruch Spinzoza.[7] Foucault's concept of biopolitics has also been battered by accusations of a narcissistic provinciality.[8] This provinciality becomes apparent when biopolitics is read from a different global history – when biopolitics is given a different social geography. Thus many authors across the global south have insisted that it is impossible to write a history of the biopolitical that starts and ends in European history, *even when* Western Europe is the frame of reference. Achille Mbembe, for instance, argued that the sadistic expressions of German Nazism were genealogically related to the sadisms of European colonialism. In the colonial space "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" were the experimental precursor for the extermination camps in Europe.[9] And before Mbembe, W. E. B. Du Bois argued that the material and discursive origins of European monumentalism, such as the gleaming boulevards of Brussels, were found in the brutal colonial regimes of the Congo.[10] This global genealogy of both the extraction and production of materiality and life has led Rosi Braidotti to conclude, "Bio-power and necro-politics are two sides of the same coin."[11]

But are the concepts of biopolitics, positive or negative, or necropolitics, colonial or postcolonial, the formation of power in which late liberalism now operates – or has been operating? If, paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze, concepts open understanding to what is all around us but not in our field of vision, does biopolitics any longer gather together under its conceptual wings what needs to be thought if we are to understand contemporary late liberalism?[12] Have we been so entranced by the image of power working through life that we haven't noticed the new problems, figures, strategies, and concepts emerging all around us, suggesting another formation of late liberal power – or the revelation of a formation that is fundamental to but hidden by the concept of biopower? Have we been so focused on exploring each and every wrinkle in the biopolitical fold – biosecurity, biospectrality, thanatopoliticality – that we forgot to notice that the figures of biopower (the hysterical woman, the Malthusian couple, the perverse adult, and the masturbating child; the camps and barracks, the panopticon and solitary confinement), once so central to our understanding of contemporary power, now seem not as decisive, to be inflected by or giving way to new figures: the Desert, the Animist, the Virus? And is a return to sovereignty our only option for understanding contemporary late liberal power? This text attempts to elaborate how our allegiance to the concept of biopower is hiding and revealing another problematic – a formation for want of a better term I am calling *geontological* power, or *geontopower*.

So let me say a few words about what I mean by geontological power, or geontopower, although its scope and import can only be known in the immanent worlds in which it continues to be made and unmade – one of which this text engages. The simplest way of sketching the difference between geontopower and biopower is that the former does not operate through the governance of life and the tactics of death but is rather a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife.[13] This text argues that as the previously stable ordering divisions of Life and Nonlife shake, new figures, tactics, and discourses of power are displacing the biopolitical quartet. But why use these terms rather than others? Why not use meteorontological power, which might more tightly reference the concept of climate change? Why not coin the ill-sounding term "gexistent," given that throughout my work I use the term "existent" to reference what might elsewhere be described as life, thing, organism, and being? Wouldn't gexistence better semanticize my claim, elaborated below, that Western ontologies are covert biontologies – Western metaphysics as a measure of all forms of existence by the qualities of one form of existence (*bios*, *zoe*) – and that biopolitics depends on this metaphysics being kept firmly in place? In the end I decided to retain the term *geontology* and its cognates, such as *geontopower*, because I want to intensify the contrasting components of nonlife (*geos*) and being (ontology) currently in play in the late liberal governance of difference and markets. Thus, geontology is intended to highlight, on the one hand, the biontological enclosure of existence (to characterize all existents as endowed with the qualities associated with Life). And, on the other hand, it is intended to highlight the difficulty of finding a critical language to account for the moment in which a form of power long self-evident in certain regimes of settler late liberalism is becoming visible globally.

Let me emphasize this last point. Geontopower is not a power that is only now emerging to replace biopolitics – biopower (the governance through life and death) has long depended on a subtending geontopower (the difference between the lively and the inert). And, similarly to how necropolitics operated openly in colonial Africa only later to reveal its shape in Europe, so geontopower has long operated openly in settler late liberalism and been insinuated in the ordinary operations of its governance of difference and markets. The attribution of an *inability* of various colonized people to differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality of the sort that emerges with life has been the grounds of casting them into a premodern mentality and a postrecognition difference. Thus the point of the concepts of geontology and geontopower is not to found a new ontology of objects, nor to establish a new metaphysics of power, nor to adjudicate the possibility or impossibility of the human ability to know the truth of the world of things. Rather they are concepts meant to help make visible the figural tactics of late liberalism as a long-standing *biontological orientation and distribution* of power crumbles, losing its efficacy as a self-evident backdrop to reason. And, more specifically, they are meant to illuminate the cramped space in which my Indigenous colleagues are forced to maneuver as they attempt to keep relevant their critical analytics and practices of existence.[14] In short, geontopower is not a concept first and an application to my friends' worlds second, but a concept that emerges from what late liberal governance looks like from this cramped space.

To begin to understand the work of the concept of geontopower relative to biopower, let me return to Foucault's three formations of power and ask two simple questions, the answers to which might have seemed long settled. First: Are the relations among sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower ones of implication, distinction, determination, or set membership? And, second: Did Foucault intend these modes of power to be historical periodizations, quasi-transcendent metaphysics of power, or variations within a more encompassing historical and social framework? Let's remember that for all our contemporary certainty that a gulf separates sovereignty from discipline power and biopower, Foucault seemed unsure of whether he was seeing a shared concept traversing all three formations of power or seeing three specific formations of power, each with their own specific conceptual unity. On the one hand, he writes that the eighteenth century witnessed "the appearance (*l'apparition*) – one might say the invention – of a new mechanism of power which had very specific procedures, completely new instruments, and very different equipment."[15] And yet Foucault also states that the formations of power do not follow each other like beads on a rosary. Nor do they conform to a model of Hegelian *aufhebung*; sovereignty does not dialectically unfold into disciplinary power and disciplinary power into biopolitics. Rather, all three formations of power are always co-present, although how they are arranged and expressed relative to each other vary across social time and space.[16] For example, German fascism deployed all three formations of power in its Holocaust – the figure of Hitler

exemplified the right of the sovereign to decide who was enemy or friend and thus could be killed or allowed to live; the gas chambers exemplified the regularity of disciplinary power; and the Aryan exemplified governance through the imaginary of population and hygiene.

We can find more recent examples. President George W. Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, steadfastly and publicly claimed the right to extrajudicial killing (a right the subsequent president also claims). But they did not enact their authority in public festivals where victims were drawn and quartered, but rather through secret human and drone-based special operations or in hidden rendition centers. And less explicit, and thus potentially more productive, new media technologies like Google and Facebook mobilize algorithms to track population trends across individual decisions, creating new opportunities for capital and new means of securitizing the intersection of individual pleasure and the well-being of certain populations, what Franco Berardi has called "semiocapitalism."[17] These modern tactics and aesthetics of sovereign power exist alongside what Henry Giroux, building on Angela Davis's crucial work on the prison industrial complex, has argued are the central features of contemporary US power: biosecurity with its panoply of ordinary incarceration blocks, and severe forms of isolation.[18] But even here, where US sovereignty seems to manifest its sharpest edge – state-sanctioned, prison-based killing – the killings are heavily orchestrated with an altogether different aesthetic and affective ordering from the days of kings. This form of state killing has witnesses, but rather than hawking wares these witnesses sit behind a glass wall where a curtain is discreetly drawn while the victim is prepared for death – or if "complications" arise, it is quickly pulled shut. The boisterous crowds are kept outside: those celebrating kept on one side of a police barrier, those holding prayer vigils on the other side. Other examples of the co-presence of all three formations of power float up in less obvious places – such as in the changing public announcements to passengers as Qantas flights approach Australian soil. Whereas staff once announced that passengers should be aware of the country's strict animal and plant quarantine regulations, they now announce the country's strict "biosecurity laws."

And yet across these very different entanglements of power we continue to use the language of sovereignty, disciplinary power, and biopolitics as if these formations were independent of each other and of history. It is as if, when we step into their streams, the currents of these various formations pull us in different directions. On the one hand, each formation of power seems to express a distinct relation, aesthetic, and tactic even as, on the other hand, we are left with a lingering feeling that some unnamed shared conceptual matrix underpins all three – or at least sovereign power on the one side and disciplinary and biopower on the other. I am hardly the first to notice this. Alain Badiou notes that, as Foucault moved from an archaeological approach to a genealogical one, "a doctrine of 'fields'" began to substitute for a sequence of "epistemical singularities" in such a way that Foucault was brought back "to the concept and to philosophy."[19] In other words, while Badiou insists that Foucault was "neither a philosopher nor a historian nor a bastardized combination of the two," he also posits that something like a metaphysical concept begins to emerge in his late work, especially in his thinking about biopolitics and the hermeneutics of the self and other. For Badiou this concept was power. And it is exactly here that the difference between biopolitics and geontopower is staked.

Rather than power, I would propose that what draws the three formations together is a common but once unmarked ontological assertion, namely, that there is a distinction between Life and Nonlife that makes a difference. Now, and ever more globally, this assertion is marked. For example, the once unremarkable observation that all three formations of power (sovereign power, disciplinary power, and biopower) work only "insofar as man is a living being" (*une prise de pouvoir sur l'homme en tant qu'etre vivant*) today trips over the space between *en tant que* and *tant que*, between the "insofar as" and the "as long as." This once perhaps not terribly belabored phrasing is now hard to avoid hearing as an epistemological and ontological conditional: all three formations work *as long as* we continue to conceptualize humans as *living things* and *as long as* humans *continue to exist*. Yes, sovereignty, discipline, and biopolitics stage, aestheticize, and publicize the dramas of life and death differently. And, yes, starting from the eighteenth century, the anthropological and physical sciences came to conceptualize humans as a single species subject to a natural law governing the life and death of individuals and species. And, yes, these new discourses opened a new relationship between the way that sovereign law organized its powers around life and death and the way that biopolitics did. And, yes, Foucault's quick summary of this transformation as a kind of inversion from the right to kill and let live to the power of making live and letting die should be modified in the light of the fact that contemporary states make live, let die, *and* kill. And, yes, all sorts of liberalisms

seem to evidence a biopolitical stain, from settler colonialism to developmental liberalism to full-on neoliberalism.[20] But something is causing these statements to be irrevocably read and experienced through a new drama, not the drama of life and death, but a form of death that begins and ends in Nonlife – namely the extinction of humans, biological life, and, as it is often put, the planet itself – which takes us to a time before the life and death of individuals and species, a time of the *geos*, of soulessness. The modifying phrase "insofar as" now foregrounds the *anthropos* as just one element in the larger set of not merely animal life but all Life as opposed to the state of original and radical Nonlife, the vital in relation to the inert, the extinct in relation to the barren. In other words, it is increasingly clear that the *anthropos* remains an element in the set of life only insofar as Life can maintain its distinction from Death/Extinction *and* Nonlife. It is also clear that late liberal strategies for governing difference and markets also only work insofar as these distinctions are maintained. And it is exactly because we can hear "insofar" that we know that these brackets are now visible, debatable, fraught, and anxious. It is certainly the case that the statement "clearly, *x* humans are more important than *y* rocks" continues to be made, persuade, stop political discourse. But what interests me is the slight hesitation, the pause, the intake of breath that now can interrupt an immediate assent.

This is the formula that is now unraveling: Life (Life{birth, growth, reproduction}v. Death) v. Nonlife.

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1
Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–78*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Picador, 2009, 1.

2
Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

3
See, for example, Joseph Masco, *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

4
Hannah Arendt, *On the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

5
See Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 1*, trans. Geoffrey Benjamin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Donna Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1989): 3–43.

6
Giorgia Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

7
See Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008); and Timothy Campbell, *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidegger to Agamben* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

8
See, for comparative purposes, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

9
Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2003): 14. See also Rosi Braidotti, "Bio-Power and Necro-Politics: Reflections on an Ethics of Sustainability," *Springerin*, vol. 2, no. 7 (2007).

10
David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century 1919–1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), especially 394–96.

11
Braidotti, "Bio-Power and Necro-Politics."

12
I understand "concept" in the broad sense in which Deleuze and William James approached the work of conceptualization, namely to actualize a series of quasi-events into a threshold. See James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Dover, 1995); Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Isabelle Stengers, "Gilles Deleuze's Last Message" http://www.recalcitrance.com/deleuzelast.htm.

13
Thus the concepts of geontology (Nonlife being) and geontopower (the power of and over Nonlife beings) are meant to indicate the current phase of thought and practice that define late liberalism – a phase that is simultaneously reconsolidating this distinction and witnessing its unraveling.

14
I will argue that a crucial part of what is forming this cramped space is a homology between natural life and critical life as techniques, vocabularies, and affective means for creating forms of existence – a scarred homology between the drama of natural life of birth, growth, and reproduction, and the death and drama of the critical life events *conatus* and *affectus* and finitude. is cramping is not happening in the abstract but through late liberal ways of governance of difference and markets.

15
Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (London: Picador, 2003), 35.

16
See Esposito, *Bios*, 57.

17
See Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (New York: Automedia, 2009). See also Andre de Macedo Duarte, "Hannah Arendt, Biopolitics and the Problem of Violence: From Animal Laborans to Homo Sacer," in *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race and Genocide*, eds. Dan Stone and Richard King (London: Berghahn, 2007), 191–204; and Claire Blencowe, "Foucault's and Arendt's 'Insider View' of Biopolitics: A Critique of Agamben," *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 23, no. 5 (2010): 113–30.

18
Henry Giroux, *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 83; Angela Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Prisons, Torture, and Empire* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005). See also Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Masco, *Theater of Operations*.

19
Alain Badiou, *The Adventure of French Philosophy* (London: Verso, 2012), 87, 93, 97.

20
See, e.g., Scott Lauria Morgenson, "The Biopolitics of Settler Colonialism: Right Here, Right Now," *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2011): 52–76; and Sandro Mezzadra, Julian Reid, and Ranabir Samaddar, *The Biopolitics of Development: Reading Michel Foucault in the Postcolonial Present* (New York: Springer, 2013).