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# When did biopolitics begin? Actuality and potentiality in historical events

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/est](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/est)**Sergei Prozorov** *University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland*

## Abstract

The article addresses the ongoing debate about the origins of biopolitics. While Foucault's analysis of biopolitics approached it as a modern rationality of government, Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series presented biopolitics as having a longer provenance, dating back to the antiquity. These polar positions are not mutually exclusive but coexist in these and other theories of biopolitics, which approach its object as both modern and ancient, having its chronological origin in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries yet also possessing a prehistory of precursors. The article interprets this dual origin in terms of Paolo Virno's theory of historical temporality, which distinguishes between the chronological past of historical events and their potential past, which accompanies and is negated in them. Coexisting with its own unrealized potential, every historical event remains incomplete and extends itself both backwards and forwards, positing its precursors and prefiguring its future outcomes. While modern in the chronological sense, biopolitics is retrospectively inscribed in a longer historical lineage, its antecedents easily identifiable in the history of political thought. Finally, we apply this approach to Virno's own account of the history of biopolitics, questioning his identification of past potential with labour-power.

## Keywords

Biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, Paolo Virno, potentiality, Roberto Esposito, temporality

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## Introduction

One of the most persistent debates in the studies of biopolitics concerns the question of its origin. Is biopolitics a modern phenomenon, coextensive with industrial capitalism, nationalism or liberalism, or does it have a longer historical lineage, perhaps even dating back to the antiquity? While the original articulation of the problematic in the work of Michel Foucault approached biopolitics as a specifically modern rationality of government, Giorgio Agamben's attempt to 'correct or at least complete' Foucault in his *Homo Sacer* series (Agamben, 1998, p. 9) posited biopolitics as 'at least as old as the sovereign exception' (ibid.: 6). These approaches form two polarities, between which the debate has unfolded, its participants not merely subscribing to either of these positions, but also developing their own interpretations of the origin of biopolitics, which could be found in economic liberalism (Collier, 2011), Darwinism (Tarizzo, 2017), Spinoza (Gratton, 2013), colonialism (Weheliye, 2014), sentimentalism (Schuller, 2018) and romanticism (Mitchell, 2021).

The question of when biopolitics began is important for understanding its specificity as rationality of government. If biopolitics is modern, then it can be understood on par with capitalism, the rise of nation states, urbanization and so on as one of the transformations defining the modern era. If it is ancient, then it must then be understood in a more overarching way as the essence of political power as such, its specific difference from other governmental rationalities becoming occluded. Thus, the proponents of the modernity of biopolitics tend to highlight its ongoing transformations in late or post-modernity, thinking in terms of periods measured in decades: welfarism, neoliberalism, post-Fordism and so on (see Dean, 2010, pp. 117–153, 175–203). In contrast, the proponents of the ancient or at least premodern origins of biopolitics understandably think in terms of continuities across centuries (Meloni, 2020). By the same token, the proponents of modernity of biopolitics are rather more likely to argue that this modern invention is soon to be obsolete, to be replaced by something new and postmodern (e.g. 'psychopolitics'; see Han, 2017, Stiegler, 2008) than the proponents of the ancient origin of biopolitics, whose views of what could possibly lie beyond biopolitics tend to be as radical as they are vague (Agamben, 2016, pp. 263–279).

In short, where one stands on the question of the origins of biopolitics has important implications for one's very concept of biopolitics and theoretical approach to it. And yet, while the debate is ongoing, its opposing positions well-rehearsed, it increasingly appears to be futile and fruitless. No amount of evidence offered by the proponents of the modern origins is likely to convince those who believe the evidence should rather be sought in a different millennium entirely. Conversely, no amount of references to Aristotle would convince those who define biopolitics as conditioned by specifically modern innovations in both power and knowledge, be it biology and statistics, economics and public health. Both sides appear to be correct in the thesis they advance yet incorrect in dismissing the theses advanced by their adversaries.

Could the problem be simply a matter of different definitions of biopolitics? Depending on one's theoretical orientation, biopolitics could then have different chronological origins. For instance, biopolitics defined in the more economic terms could be dated to the emergence of industrial capitalism (Collier, 2011), while biopolitics defined in terms

of the foundation of state power on the biological features of the population could be dated back to the later emergence of nationalism and state racism (Weheliye, 2014). The debate on origins is then a debate between different conceptions of biopolitics and hence need not be resolved in any definitive way, since it is a laudable example of theoretical pluralism.

Convenient as it might be, this solution remains too simplistic. This is not merely because it would be difficult to study something whose very origin remains disputable. More importantly, the dispute in question takes place not *between* theoretical schools or approaches but *within* them. As we shall demonstrate in the following section, the origin of biopolitics is always double, its usually modern chronological dating accompanied by another, usually earlier ‘pre-history’ that remains ambiguous yet essential to it. In the analyses of biopolitics after Foucault, biopolitics is neither ancient nor modern but always in some sense both: ancient but only revealed in modernity or modern but prepared by centuries of political thought.

In section ‘The double past: Chronological actuality and past potential’, we shall further elucidate this double past by engaging with Paolo Virno’s theory of historical temporality. Virno approaches historical events as always involving both chronological and actual origins and a potential past which cannot be fitted into chronological history but rather coexists with every chronological ‘now’ as the latent ‘not now’, simultaneously negated and preserved in it. This approach permits us to reframe the debate on the origins of biopolitics as a debate between two no longer mutually exclusive perspectives based on the coexistence of chronological and potential modalities of the past in every historical event. While the perspective of prefiguration moves from the chronological moment into the future, focusing on how its potential is realized and negated in new configurations of biopolitics, the perspective of retrospection moves from the chronological moment back into the past in order to find its antecedents that were not fully realized in the past and thus coexist virtually with this moment.

In section ‘Duality of the origin: Retrospection and prefiguration’, we apply this approach to Virno’s own analysis of biopolitics, which interprets it as the rise of the past potential of capitalism, which he defines in terms of labour-power, to appearance within the chronological moment itself. In contrast to Virno, we shall interpret labour-power in Foucauldian terms, not as the past potential conserved and negated by capitalism but rather as the effect of the capitalist organization of labour. The potential that is negated by this organization is not labour-power but life as such, whose entry into history conditions the rise of capitalism without being reducible to it. In the conclusion, we address the implications of our reframing of the debate on origins for the studies of biopolitics.

## **Modern, ancient or both: Dating biopolitics**

Michel Foucault’s introduction of the problematic of biopolitics in *The History of Sexuality* clearly presents it as a modern phenomenon, ‘starting in the seventeenth century’ (Foucault, 1990, p. 138). The shift from the sovereign power of death to power over life took two forms, still ‘clearly separate in the eighteenth century’ (ibid., p. 140): the anatomo-politics of the body emerging in the disciplinary institutions and the biopolitics

of the population exemplified by the developments in statistics and demography as well as the innovations in economic science. The articulation of these two forms ‘would go on to make up the great technology of power in the nineteenth century’ (ibid.), which was ‘an indispensable element in the development of capitalism’, which ‘would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes’ (ibid.: 141).

Thus, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, we observe ‘nothing less than the entry of life into history’, whereby ‘methods of power and knowledge assumed responsibility for the life processes and undertook to control and modify them’ (ibid., pp. 141–142). Foucault concludes that

a society’s ‘threshold of modernity’ has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living being with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being into question. (Ibid., p. 143)

A similar diagnosis is ventured in Foucault’s 1975–1976 lecture course *Society Must be Defended*: biopolitics is traced back to seventeenth century techniques of power centred on the body, the eighteenth-century technology of power focused on the population and its vital processes and the nineteenth-century innovations in the government of social problems and urban areas (Foucault, 2003, pp. 242–245). As a result of these processes, ‘power’s hold over life’ was firmly established during the nineteenth century. Biopolitics thus appears to be a clearly and unequivocally modern phenomenon. And yet, in the final lecture of the course Foucault adds a twist to this diagnosis by raising the question of racism.

As a ‘[way] of introducing a break into the domain of life between what must live and what must die’ (ibid., p. 254), racism reinscribes the old sovereign power of death in the modern apparatus of biopolitics, permitting states to kill in order to protect life: ‘if the power of normalization wished to exercise the old sovereign right to kill, it must become racist’ (ibid., p. 256). Foucault analyses Nazism as the extreme form of this reinscription, in which ‘the classic, archaic mechanism that gave the State the right of life and death over its citizens, and the mechanism organized around discipline and regulation, or in other words, the mechanism of biopower – coincide exactly’ (ibid., p. 260). Racism is thus a way of letting the premodern or even ‘archaic’ form of power into the modern one through the backdoor (see Foucault, 1990, p. 149). Biopolitics both marks the very threshold of modernity and permits archaic forms of power to persist within its apparatuses.

While Foucault thereby opened the backdoor to let sovereign power into the biopolitical regime, Giorgio Agamben kicked this door down in his rejection of any relationship of succession between sovereign and bio-power altogether:

the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.* In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception. (Agamben, 1998, p. 6, emphasis original)

How old is the sovereign exception, then? While most conceptual historians would date the concept of sovereignty to the sixteenth century and the thought of Jean Bodin (Bartelson, 1995; Hinsley, 1986), Agamben's account of sovereign power goes far back to the antiquity so that the first paradigm of sovereign power is claimed to be formulated in Pindar's fragment *Nomos Basileus* (ibid., p. 30–35). Biopolitics is thus at least as old as sovereign power, but sovereign power is *much older* than most political theorists would be prepared to argue. While Agamben has been criticized for de-historicizing and even 'ontologizing' both biopolitics and sovereignty (Lemke, 2011, p. 62–64; Pas-savant, 2007), these accusations miss the mark: Agamben's search for the origin of biopolitics does not lead him outside but only ever further back into history.

This does not mean that there were no substantial transformations in modernity of the kind addressed by Foucault. Yet, for Agamben these transformations did not produce a new constellation of power but rather brought to light the constellation that has remain oblique or concealed for centuries:

Biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception. Placing biological life at the centre of its calculations, the modern State therefore does nothing other than bring to light the secret tie uniting power and bare life, thereby reaffirming the bond between modern power and the most immemorial of the *arcana imperii*. (Agamben, 1998, p. 6)

Thus, biopolitics does not mark a threshold of modernity, separating this period from the 'millennia' in which man was what it was for Aristotle. Instead, modernity illuminates the biopolitical character that power had all along, but which was hitherto marginal and implicit:

What characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion of *zoe* in the polis, which is, in itself, absolutely ancient – nor simply the fact that life as such becomes a principal object of the projections and calculations of state power. Instead, the decisive fact is that the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. (Ibid., p. 9)

In short, while there has always been biopolitics, in modernity there is *nothing but biopolitics*. It is notable that Jacques Derrida, who has criticized Agamben's argument in an uncharacteristically blunt and derisive manner, actually made a strikingly similar claim regarding the origin of biopolitics, finding its origin already in Aristotle but stopping short of rendering modern transformations irrelevant:

[What] Aristotle says is that man is that living being who is taken by politics: he is a political living being, and essentially so. In other words, he is zoo-political, that's his essential definition, that's what is proper to him, *idion*; and therefore man is immediately zoo-political, in his very life, and it's obvious that already in Aristotle there's thinking of what is today called 'zoopolitics' or 'biopolitics'. Which does not mean, of course, that Aristotle had already foreseen, thought, understood, analysed all the figures of today's zoopolitics or biopolitics: it would be absurd to think so. But as for the biopolitical or zoopolitical

structure, it's put forward by Aristotle, it's already there, and the debate opens there. (Derrida, 2009, p. 349)

While for Foucault the figure of Aristotle serves as the indicator of the pre-biopolitical and hence premodern form of human existence, for both Agamben and Derrida biopolitics is 'already there', in Aristotle if not before. Whatever its modern transformations, biopolitics now casts its shadow far into antiquity.

Roberto Esposito begins his own account of biopolitics by explicitly problematizing this dual origin, which he attributes to Foucault's original formulations:

If biopolitics is born with the end of sovereignty, this means that the history of biopolitics is largely modern and in a certain sense postmodern. If instead, as Foucault suggests on other occasions, biopolitics accompanies the sovereign regime, constituting a particular articulation or a specific tonality, then its genesis is more ancient, one that ultimately coincides with that of politics itself, which has always in one way or another been devoted to life. (Esposito, 2008, p. 52)

This reading appears to subsume Agamben's correction of Foucault under Foucault's own theory. Yet, while Foucault certainly did recognize that biopolitics could accompany the sovereign regime (or, better, the other way round, as in state racism and Nazism), he did not view sovereignty as coinciding with politics itself, but emerging historically around two centuries before biopolitics (Foucault, 2003, pp. 43–46, 168–169). Thus, it would be difficult to extend Foucault's approach to include Agamben's claims: the former thinker's concern with discontinuities and periodization being hard to reconcile with the latter's affirmation of the persistence of the originary throughout history.

Esposito's own account of the origins of biopolitics appears to be located between these two contrasting perspectives. For Esposito, biopolitics only reaches a 'threshold of modernity' when it is approached from the perspective of immunity:

Only when biopolitics is linked conceptually to the immunitary dynamic of the negative protection of life does biopolitics reveal its specifically modern genesis. This is not because its roots are missing in other preceding (they aren't), but because only modernity makes of individual self-preservation the presupposition of all other political categories, from sovereignty to liberty. (Esposito, 2008, p. 9)

The origin of the immunitary perspective is traced by Esposito back to Hobbes's political thought:

When Hobbes not only places the problem of the *conservatio vitae* at the center of his own thought, but conditions it to the subordination of a constitutive power that is external to it, namely to sovereign power, the immunitary principle has virtually already been founded. (Esposito, 2008, p. 46)

Thus, when it is conceived in immunitary terms, the origin of biopolitics dates back to the seventeenth century, which was, after all, Foucault's own earliest dating. It is

nonetheless notable that, while Foucault did discuss Hobbes at length in 'Society Must be Defended', it was never as a prototype of biopolitical rationality but as a paradigm of juridico-philosophical discourse on sovereign power which biopolitical rationality eventually supplanted (Foucault, 2003, pp. 89–99).

While Esposito identifies Hobbes as the originary figure in the history of biopolitics, he also issues a caveat that this 'objective genesis of a theory' (ibid., p. 47) cannot be confused with its 'self-interpretation, which obviously occurs later' (ibid.). The key figure in this self-interpretation is Hegel, who, without explicitly adopting the category of immunization, captured its logic in approaching the negative as the 'motor of the positive, the fuel that allows it to function' (ibid., p. 47). The twentieth century thought, from philosophical anthropology to psychoanalysis and beyond, persisted in this tendency, positing the negative as the productive impulse of history, politics and human existence more generally (ibid.).

The twentieth century also introduces another threshold to the history of biopolitics. While modern immunitary categories of sovereignty, liberty and property were indeed characterized by the presupposition of the preservation of life, they also served as apparatuses of mediation between life and politics, precluding anything like a direct translation of (biological) life into politics. This latter translation took place under Nazism, which remains the only case of a 'literal' biopolitics, a politics reduced to biology and a biology reduced to politics (ibid.). While Foucault viewed Nazism as the entry of the archaic power of death into the modern biopolitical apparatus and Agamben viewed it as the illumination of the originary co-belonging of the two powers, Esposito approaches it in terms of 'decomposed modernity' (Esposito, 2008, p. 112), whereby immunitary apparatuses run wild and attack the very entity they were meant to protect.

The final approach we consider in our overview of the debate is developed by Mika Ojakangas who argues that biopolitics 'is as old as Western political thought itself: the politico-philosophical categories of classical thought, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle, were already biopolitical categories' (Ojakangas, 2016, p. 6). While this statement clearly separates Ojakangas from Foucault's thesis on the modernity of biopolitics, he also differs from the other two authors we have considered above.

While Ojakangas's account at first glance appears similar to Agamben's in locating the origins of biopolitics in the antiquity, he takes issue with Agamben's argument about the mode of biopolitical governance in ancient Greece, which Agamben famously theorized in terms of inclusive exclusion of bare life, whereby it functions as a negative foundation of political life. Instead, Ojakangas argues that bare, or at least natural life was 'at the heart of politico-philosophical regulations in classical Greece' (ibid., p. 17). The phenomena associated with natural life, that is, sexual conduct, pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing were not 'inclusively excluded' from the affairs of the polis but simply included in it.

The difference from Esposito is even more pronounced, as, while Esposito clearly sees in Plato's political thought a key philosophical precursor to biopolitics, he also insists on its key differences from modern biopolitics. For Esposito, Plato's politics is aristocratic and not ethno-racial and is oriented towards the protection of community and not individual life (Esposito, 2008, pp. 53–54). As we have seen, it is specifically the immunitary orientation towards the negative protection of individual life that defines

biopolitics for Esposito, hence it is Hobbes and not Plato that is its originary figure. Ojakangas begs to differ: the ethno-racial character of Nazi biopolitics did not exclude its explicitly aristocratic orientation, which, moreover, was addressed to the community and not the individual. If, as Esposito argued, Nazism was the extreme and paroxysmal pinnacle of biopolitics, then its blueprint was already prepared by Plato (Ojakangas, 2016, pp. 18–19).

## The double past: Chronological actuality and past potential

This brief overview of the debate on the origins of biopolitics demonstrates that the question of dating biopolitics is far from simple, since it is involved in its very definition. From Foucault's original articulation of the problematic onwards, biopolitics is never simply modern: it lets in and reinscribes archaic power (Foucault), is itself originally intertwined with this power (Agamben), delimits itself from this power by mediating institutions (Esposito) or is as such purely and simply ancient in origin (Ojakangas). While Foucault's analysis of the emergence of biopolitical technologies in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries is hardly disputed if frequently clarified and elaborated (see Collier, 2009; Vatter, 2014), in the studies of biopolitics after Foucault the concept acquires a longer provenance. Thus, without seeking to refute Foucault's analyses of modern biopolitical technologies of government, Esposito can demonstrate how its orientation towards a negative protection of life is already present in Hobbes, while Agamben can argue that its orientation towards the inclusive exclusion of bare life was in fact prefigured in Aristotle's concept of potentiality.

Yet, it is immediately notable that these precursors to biopolitics turn out to be qualitatively different from what they prefigure, so much so that they might be more adequately discussed as the 'pre-history' of biopolitics. Indeed, one may claim that biopolitics goes back to Aristotle and Hobbes only if this 'going back' refers to something other than the transformations in the practices of government analysed by Foucault. Indeed, neither Agamben nor Esposito address any chronological events in or before Hobbes's and Aristotle's lifetimes that could be presented as evidence for the presence of biopolitics in actual practices of government during these periods. Instead, they base their argumentation almost entirely on philosophical discourse, which somehow anticipates the rationalities of government that would be developed much later. What is this *other* origin of biopolitics that is primarily philosophical?

In order to understand the dual origin of biopolitics, we shall turn to Paolo Virno's account of historical temporality. As a leading figure in contemporary Italian philosophy, Virno has been an important interlocutor of both Agamben and Esposito and, as we shall see below, has himself contributed to the debate on biopolitics and its origins. At this stage, let us first consider Virno's approach to historical temporality as such. As Virno has argued in his *Déjà vu and the End of History* (2015a), every historical moment is dual, comprising both the *actuality* of chronological time (its calendar dating), in which it is located alongside other historical events, and the *potentiality* of the indefinite past, which accompanies every act insofar as it is negated by it. An act always occurs *in* time and can be situated chronologically in relation to other acts that precede or follow it.

Actuality entails being present in the current moment, a ‘now’, irrespective of whether this now actually belongs to the present, the past or the future.

In contrast, potential is that which is not actual and hence cannot be dated chronologically. It can only exist insofar as it does *not* coincide with actuality: ‘The potential is the persistent not-now against which each *hic et nunc* is defined, the unmovable latency which constitutes the horizon of each dateable event’ (ibid., p. 70). In Virno’s argument, this latency refers to the *totality* of time, within which chronological events occur but which itself remains immutable. This leads him to a counter-intuitive thesis: while we commonly link potential and act in terms of actualization, whereby potential is always a potential act and an act is always a realized potential, we must instead consider their relation in terms of the *negation* of potential by act. The fact negates the ‘not now’ that is its horizon without in any way serving as its actualization. Acts of speaking, working or feeling do not exhaust the potential to speak, work or feel, but rather negate its character as potential in the moment of the execution of the act. This negation evidently does not eliminate the potential but rather ensures its persistence alongside the act:

[Far] from realising potential, the act negates it. It is not its development or metamorphosis, but its limit. If potential were positively realised, no trace of it would remain: its accomplishment is the same thing as its disappearance. But since it is, instead, contradicted by the act, potential remains the same: it *persists* as a potential that can never be actualized. Potential is neither transitory nor retractable: its temporal prerogative is that of *permanence*. (Virno, 2015a, p. 87, emphasis original)

Thus, potential refers to the totality of time, yet this totality also remains incomplete: ‘total time is unrealizable: it is never completed because it never even begins to be accomplished. Its permanence relies on its non-actuality: the two are inextricably bound together’ (ibid., p. 95). Thus, in terms of *chronological progression*, potential and act ‘are always simultaneous: potential is not the prefiguration of the act but its heterogeneous correlate, its incommensurable shadow’ (ibid., p. 103). The ‘not-now’ does not precede the ‘now’ but accompanies it ‘obliquely, as an echo’ (ibid., p. 105): the potential can only enter a determinate moment in the present by virtue of the act that negates it. The permanent can only come to exist by virtue of being negated in the fleeting present. We may only observe the faculty of speech in particular speech acts, labour-power in concrete acts of labour, capacity for enjoyment in specific moments of pleasure. If this potential did not exist simultaneously with the acts but preceded them chronologically, it would lose its potential character and become yet another act, perhaps an act of *causation* but not potential. Such an act would no longer be heterogeneous to the act that it causes but would rather form a chronological series with it.

While in terms of chronological progression potential and act are simultaneous, in terms of *temporal order* the potential always precedes the act. In another counter-intuitive thesis, Virno suggests that potential, which we tend to associate with the future as something that is not yet actual but can become such, in fact refers to the past, albeit a past that is non-chronological but ‘formal’ and ‘indefinite’ (Virno, 2015a, p. 60). Yet, what does it mean to say that the permanent totality of time is nonetheless *anterior* to the act, belonging to a formal and indefinite past? Since the act negates the ‘not-now’, it

must necessarily take place after it. The execution of a faculty presupposes its existence and thus comes ‘after’ it, even though both the faculty and its execution coexist simultaneously. It is important to note that this past never existed in actuality and hence cannot be narrated let alone dated chronologically. However, far back in the past an event is chronologically located, there is always a past that precedes it, which is structurally earlier than the very beginning of time since it comprises time in its totality before it even begins. For any historical event whatsoever, past potential thus constitutes its *meta-history*. This meta-historical nature of past potential distinguishes it not merely from causes that are chronologically anterior to the act but also from conditions of possibility in the Foucauldian sense, which are temporally coextensive with the practices they condition and therefore cannot be said to be negated by them (Foucault, 2002, pp. xx–xxiv).

Thus, Virno concludes that every event has a double past.

On the one hand, the mass of previous activities that preceded it in time, and, in some measure, caused it. On the other hand, enduring potential, which has no home within chronological progression and is always and on each occasion anterior to whatever is inscribed therein. (Ibid., p. 113)

These two aspects of the past are frequently confused, giving rise to familiar phenomena. When potential past is confused with the chronological past, we have an experience of *déjà vu*, in which we erroneously believe we are reliving an actual event from the past (real anachronism). Conversely, when chronological past is confused with potential past, we approach every act in the present from the perspective of potential past, finding in it nothing but the manifestation of the faculty it negates (formal anachronism) (see Virno, 2015a, pp. 26–33, 125–126). While formal anachronism approaches every event of speaking, working or enjoyment from the perspective of the respective faculties that are negated but still persist in it, real anachronism mistakes these faculties for events in their own right, which makes the actual events appear as repetition of earlier occurrences.

To avoid this confusion, we should approach every historical moment in terms of what Virno calls a ‘double game’:

potential and act are an always-simultaneous ‘before’ and ‘after’: the not-now precedes the ‘now’ with which it also coexists; the pure past, captured in the language faculty, is contemporaneous to the empirical present which is on each occasion articulated by the really-uttered word. (Ibid., p. 134)

Every historical moment is in fact a field of forces in tension, characterized by dual directionality, pointing at once both forward and backward, and an incomplete or unsaturated character: harbouring potential within itself, the moment could never realize or accomplish its potential, simply because it is not in the nature of potential to be accomplished. The potential thus ‘holds open a lacuna within the instant. And this lacuna requires filling’ (ibid., p. 142).

This filling can take place in a regressive manner in the direction from the ‘after’ towards the ‘before’ or in a progressive manner from the ‘before’ towards the ‘after’. In the first case, the historical moment establishes a series of its own antecedents (the French Revolution for the Russian Revolution, the classical period for neoclassicism), thus inserting itself in chronological time. These past events incarnate the potential concealed within the present moment, ‘whereby today’s potential is dressed up in the equivocal clothes of a tradition or example. In exchange, the traditions and examples which the *hic et nunc* uses as its mirror maintain an aura of unresolved virtuality’ (ibid., p. 144). This incarnation of past potential permits to construct an act as a repetition and possibly even a redemption of the past, endowing contemporary events with historical continuity and granting past events a new life in the ‘neo-’ mode.

In the second case, the historical moment produces the future in order to fill the lacuna between the ‘before’ and ‘after’, arising from the non-realizability of the former in the latter. It posits a series of other ‘afters’ in chronological time that both promise and postpone this filling indefinitely: ‘it is only in order to realise the (potential) past that we construct the future’ (ibid., p. 145). The present moment thus establishes itself as the origin of the events it prefigures. Retrospection and prefiguration are two operations that characterize every historical moment, including those posited as origins or ends, ‘which are themselves ‘afters’ linked to a dateless ‘before’” (ibid., p. 146):

As a definite actuality, the instant that I am living provides a progressive filling to the already-lived instant (or better, the lacuna within it) as well as a regressive filling to the instant that is still to be lived (to its undefined value). (Ibid., p. 146)

While there are important differences between Foucault and Virno with regard, for example, to the relation between history and (human) nature (see Virno, 2015b, pp. 171–186), Virno’s approach to historical temporality resonates with the ethos of Foucault’s genealogies insofar as it seeks to disturb the identity of the present by highlighting the potential unrealized in it. While for Foucault this unrealized potential of the present arose from the contingencies of its history, for Virno it is the present event itself that conjures its past potential that endows it with an ‘aura of unresolved virtuality’.

## **Duality of the origin: Retrospection and prefiguration**

This brief exposition of Virno’s theory of historical temporality permits us to understand the persistent duality of the origins of biopolitics. A series of chronological events from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century that constituted the birth of biopolitics for Foucault (the emergence of disciplines, statistics and demography, urban governance, etc.) always coexists with past potential, which opens in it the lacuna that invites both retrospection and prefiguration. Prefiguration would continue the narrative about biopolitics into the (already past) future, whereby it would emerge as an origin of the process leading to a certain state of affairs in our time and beyond it, be it neoliberalism, post-Fordism or the Anthropocene. In contrast, retrospection would posit a series of antecedents of eighteenth to nineteenth century biopolitics, which render the latter as an outcome of a process reaching far back into the past. These antecedents can go as far

back as Aristotle and indeed even further, since for Agamben the logic of the inclusive exclusion of bare life is contemporaneous with the entry of humans into language and the emergence of first human collectivities (Agamben, 2007, p. 9; Agamben, 1998, p. 8).

While these precursors evidently refer to real historical figures or events, their function is not to provide an alternative chronological starting point for biopolitics, but to embody the potential that remains unrealized in the historical moment. Thus, these antecedents, be they Aristotle, Hobbes, Spinoza or Hegel, do not in a strict sense contradict Foucault's original dating of biopolitics, since they only emerge by virtue of this dating itself as embodiments of the potential that the act of dating opened up and could not fully realize. Agamben's aspiration to 'correct or complete' Foucault's account of biopolitics would not be possible without Foucault not only in the obvious sense of needing something to correct or complete, but also in the less obvious sense of Foucault's account *itself* opening up the possibilities of its completion and correction, insofar as the historical events he studied were sufficiently unsaturated as to invite the operations of prefiguration and retrospection. Like every other historical moment, the period of transformations in the rationalities of government in the seventeenth to nineteenth century outlined by Foucault could be seen as both having been prepared by a variety of precursors and itself preparing subsequent historical developments.

Virno's approach to the temporality of events also permits us to understand why in the aftermath of its articulation by Foucault the concept of biopolitics was taken up primarily by philosophers and not political scientists, sociologists, economists or historians. In Agamben's argument, philosophy is distinguished by a faculty that Schopenhauer termed *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*, a capacity for elaboration or development that permits philosophy to intervene in any field or domain and interpret any phenomenon or event (Agamben, 2009, p. 8). If philosophy can latch itself onto any field or domain (thus producing philosophy of nature, politics, art, science, etc.), this is because it is primarily concerned with exploring and elucidating not the actual states of affairs in this domain that are the object of positive sciences but rather the potential that accompanies these states of affairs. The capacity for elaboration that characterizes philosophy is nothing other than the potentiality for explicating potential in every act, that is, potentiality to the second degree. This is why philosophical discourse is not merely good at finding potential antecedents to the events or phenomena it studies but readily reveals precursors of its *own*, its exposition of past potential having *always already* been exposed in the past. This is not because, as its detractors never fail to insinuate, philosophy repeats itself incessantly, but because its activity of the exposition of potential stands, like every other activity, in relation to the unrealized potential of its own.

Ojakangas's reading of the origins of biopolitics is particularly interesting from this perspective. At first glance, his argument about the origins of biopolitics in ancient Greece appears as yet another example of the discourse on biopolitics retrospectively positing the precursors that fill its lacunae in the present. On this reading, his argument would not be much different from Agamben's attempt to complete Foucault by teasing out the philosophical antecedents of the concept of biopolitics. Yet, in an interesting twist, Ojakangas explicitly refuses to see Plato's and Aristotle's texts as philosophical works akin to Hobbes, Spinoza or Hegel and chooses to read them as the prototypes of today's social sciences, that is, as positive and empirical rather than speculative sciences:

[Plato's] *Republic* and *Laws* as well as Aristotle's *Politics* have been read for too long as books on political philosophy in the modern sense of the term. More than philosophical books, they are books addressing questions we nowadays associated with social and human sciences, particularly with demography, sociology, political science, economics, administrative studies, pedagogy, psychology, and even childcare science: what are the causes of population growth and decrease, what is the proper size of the population and how to obtain it, how to ensure the quality of the human population and to prevent its degeneration, [...] how to promote public hygiene and what kind of policy measures are needed in order to 'organize life' so that it reinforces and promotes, to use terms employed by Aristotle throughout his *Politics*, the security (*asphaleia*) and well-being (*eudaimonia*) of the city-state. (Ojakangas, 2016, p. 12)

While this fragment might appear as a minor methodological note, it acquires a much greater significance in the context of our reading. By choosing to read these texts as manuals of governance rather than philosophical treatises, Ojakangas leaves the philosophical terrain of precursors, where Plato and Aristotle could coexist with Hobbes and Spinoza, and addresses the origin of biopolitics in chronological terms, as an event on par with the seventeenth to nineteenth century innovations in governance analysed by Foucault. Rather than explicate the potential coexisting with the chronological origin of biopolitics in modernity, Ojakangas ventures to establish its alternative chronological origin. Antiquity is no longer an 'oblique echo' accompanying modernity, but a historical moment *in its own right*, which, in accordance with Virno's argument, has its own lacunae to fill, this time oriented towards prefiguration rather than retrospection. The unresolved virtuality of the Greek origin of biopolitics is tempered by positing a series of 'afters' that ultimately lead to its 'rediscovery' in early modernity after centuries of oblivion in the medieval period (Ojakangas, 2016, pp. 128–129). In this manner, the Greek origin of biopolitics is fulfilled by being projected into the future. Ojakangas's account thus emerges as a rigorous inversion of Agamben's thesis, which rather sought to fill the lacuna in the modern concept of biopolitics by retrospectively positing its antecedents in the Antiquity.

In a pre-emptive response to critics, Ojakangas argues that his argument about the ancient origins of biopolitics cannot be accused of 'anachronism' any more than Foucault's original reading could be: after all, no one spoke about biopolitics in the eighteenth century either (Ojakangas, 2016, p. 11). Indeed, as we have seen, formal anachronism is nothing other than the structure of historicity as such: every act in the chronological present coexists with the potential belonging to an indeterminate past. While formal anachronism is unavoidable, the question that may be posed to Ojakangas's analysis is whether or not it exemplifies a lapse into real anachronism, whereby past potential becomes converted into a chronological act, functioning as an alternative origin in the manner of *déjà vu*. With respect to biopolitics, the *déjà vu* may arise from interpreting the potentialities for the government of life as acts of such government in their own right:

[the] condition of possibility of an event is represented as another event, its outdated original version. The real anachronism denies the simultaneity of potential and act,

disposition and performance, past-in-general and instantaneous present; but, for precisely this reason, it also denies their essential difference. (Virno, 2015a, p. 30)

The divergence of Ojakangas from Agamben is again instructive here. While for Agamben, the inscription of bare life into the polis in ancient Greece *prepared* the possibility for its becoming the privileged object of power in modernity, for Ojakangas life always already *was* such a privileged object in the antiquity, there being no relationship of prefiguration between antiquity and modernity. Nor is this relationship that of simple identity: Ojakangas clearly recognizes that the economic concerns of modern biopolitics were absent in the antiquity (*ibid.*, pp. 8–9). Instead, the relationship is simply that between two chronological events, which are somewhat similar yet still distinct. As with every *déjà vu*, the effect of this recasting is a sense that everything that happens has happened before, there being nothing really new under the sun.

It is beyond the scope of this article to try to adjudicate whether the anachronism at work in Ojakangas's argument is formal or real. The point is only to demonstrate how biopolitics, like every historical event, is associated with a past that either coexists with it in the mode of potential or precedes it as a chronological origin. Not every sense of *déjà vu* is entirely erroneous, as it may be possible to recognize partial similarities between distinct events. Conversely, such a sense cannot be relied on without reflection, since these similarities may rather emerge from the coexistence of the act with its potential.

## Labour-power or life: The potential of Biopolitics

Virno's theory of the double game of potential and act is applicable to any historical moment whatsoever. It appears particularly suitable to the debate on the origins of biopolitics, since it permits us to reconcile the at first glance opposed claims about its ancient and modern origins. Yet, in Virno's own reading, his theory is also pertinent to the studies of biopolitics insofar as it illuminates the *singularity* of this historical epoch: whereas for Foucault biopolitics is marked by the 'entry of life into history', for Virno it is characterized by the explicit rise of past potential to appearance in a chronological moment – in other words, the entry of *meta*-history into history. In this section, we shall demonstrate the difference between these two diagnoses and argue that, despite the analytical utility of his theory of historical temporality, Virno's reading of biopolitics remains problematic.

Virno argues that capitalism 'is the first fully historical form of social organization' (2015a, p. 161), not only because it revolutionizes all social relations and liquidates traditional forms of life, but, more importantly, because it exhibits, for the first time, the functioning of history itself as a historical fact. Insofar as it appropriates not merely myriad acts of labour, but labour-power itself, transforming potential into a commodity, capitalism is the first 'epoch in which the historicity of experience can be expressed historically' (2015a, p. 160). What was previously the oblique potential accompanying acts of labour enters chronological history itself as an empirical phenomenon, which is not simultaneous with these acts but now precedes them, insofar as the purchase of labour-power precedes the actual production process.

Virno interprets biopolitics as conditioned by this transformation of historicity under capitalism:

The far from mythological origin of that mechanism of knowledges and powers which Michel Foucault termed biopolitics should undoubtedly be sought within the mode of existence of labour-power. The practical importance which potential assumes *qua* potential within the capitalist mode of production, its inseparability from the immediate 'bodily' existence – this and only this is the foundation of the biopolitical perspective. (2015a, p. 165)

It is not a matter of inferring biopolitics from the capitalist attempt to increase labour productivity by controlling the living bodies of the workers – a variant on the 'repressive hypothesis' that Foucault's theory of biopolitics was advanced against (Foucault, 1990, pp. 17–49). Instead, life becomes the object of government because 'it serves as the substratum for a faculty, labour-power, which has the autonomous significance of a use-value. What is at issue here is not the productivity of actual labour, but the exchangeability of the potential to labour itself' (Virno, 2015a, p. 166). Since labour-power is inseparable from living bodies, which are exempt from the exchange, these bodies become privileged objects of power and knowledge as life provides the 'unit of measurement for the exchange itself' (2015a, p. 168). Thus, life enters the centre stage of politics, when labour-power, the faculty for labour as such, enters the chronological present of production.

In Virno's account, biopolitics is dated chronologically in much the same way as Foucault dated it: the rise of industrial capitalism in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century. The twist in his reading is that this was also the period, in which the past potential that usually accompanies the present actuality in an oblique manner *itself* entered the historical moment. While this potential is often given incarnation in the antedecents posited in the process of retrospection, in this singular historical moment that exhibits its own historicity potential comes to be exhibited in actuality as such, without any need for positing its precursors. There is therefore no need for retrospection in Virno's analysis of biopolitics, but there is room for prefiguration.

The tendency that Virno identifies in early industrial capitalism reaches its apex in the contemporary post-Fordist capitalism, the subject of Virno's many insightful and incisive analyses (Virno, 2004, 2008). In post-Fordism, actual labour increasingly consists in the

exhibition (more than the application) of the potential to labour, the real execution imitates the faculty's mode of existence, rather than being separated from it; the structural characteristics of the labour-power (latency, inseparability from the worker's living body, etc.) infect the specific operations through which it is explicated. (Virno, 2015a, p. 186)

Acts of labour appear to no longer negate the potentiality for labour or speech but rather to expose and imitate it in actions that no longer produce anything outside themselves and hence resemble performance arts (Virno, 2004, pp. 61–63), evaluated as to their virtuosity.

Contemporary socioeconomic transformations thus provide an ‘after’ that promise to fill the lacunae in the chronological dating of biopolitics to early industrial capitalism. It is only from the perspective of today’s tendencies towards immaterial labour, precarious work and valorization of flexibility that the late eighteenth century industrial capitalism may appear as the origin of biopolitics, which, moreover, begins to appear as an inexorable tendency insofar as the entry of potential into actuality that was its origin has grown only more intense from this originary moment onwards.

A detailed critique of Virno’s account of biopolitics is beyond the scope of this article. We would only like to make one corrective to Virno’s analysis that proceeds from his own account of the relation between potential and act. While Virno’s account of capitalism traces the entry of the meta-history of potential into history as such, his reading identifies potential almost exclusively with labour-power. This, in turn, permits him to reduce biopolitics to the rationality of government that serves to maintain the existence of the ‘substratum’ of the labour-power that is sold on the marketplace. Biopolitics thus becomes something like a superstructural addendum to capitalism that is both logically and temporally its consequence: only when labour-power rises to the forefront in the sphere of production, can life become a privileged object of government.

How plausible is this identification of potential with labour-power? While it is evident that the potential for labour precedes and is negated in concrete acts of labour, the same can be said about any act whatsoever. The faculties of playing, running or dreaming similarly precede and are negated in concrete acts of playing, running and dreaming, yet we usually do not elevate any of these faculty to the status of a privileged or even primary faculty, whose appearance within history turns the respective period into a radical exception. In his lecture course *The Punitive Society*, which predates by a few years his development of the concept of biopolitics, Foucault explicitly rejected the Marxian idea of labour as ‘the concrete essence of man’:

It is false to say, with certain famous post-Hegelians, that labour is man’s concrete existence [*sic!*]. The time and life of man are not labour by nature: they are pleasure, discontinuity, festivity, rest, need, moments, chance, violence and so on. Now, it is all this explosive energy that needs to be transformed into a continuous labour-power continually offered on the market. Life must be synthesized into labour-power, which involves the coercion of this system of sequestration. (Foucault, 2015, p. 232)

While Foucault does not disagree with the Marxian analysis of the role of labour-power in the emergence of capitalism, he refuses to see in it the expression of anything like a concrete essence of humanity or, in Virno’s terminology, the meta-historical potential of the human condition. Labour-power is always already an *effect* of an organizing operation that transforms the ‘explosive energy’ of pleasure, festivity, violence – in short, life – into a continuous commodity that could be continually offered on the market. It is this organization that bio-power performs, which renders it indispensable for the development of capitalism.

This divergence has important implications for the analysis of both biopolitics and capitalism. If labour-power no longer refers to past potential but to chronological actuality, then the capitalist period, when it does indeed come to the fore, no longer appears

exceptional in the sense of making historicity itself appear in history. On the contrary, this epoch is neither more nor less historical than the ones preceding it. Virno's somewhat excessive enthusiasm about the singularity of our present might therefore be tempered by Foucault's well-known scepticism about grand declarations of new eras:

[We] should have the modesty to say that, on the one hand, the time we live in is *not* the unique or fundamental or irruptive point in history where everything is completed and begun again. We must also have the modesty to say that, on the other hand, the time we live in is very interesting; it needs to be analyzed with the proviso that we do not allow ourselves the facile, rather theatrical declaration that this moment in which we exist is one of total perdition, in the abyss of darkness, or a total daybreak, etc. It is a time like any other, or rather, a time, which is never quite like any other. (Foucault, 1988, p. 36)

While there is nothing exceptional about the epoch of capitalism, it nonetheless remains not 'quite like any other' period, precisely insofar as it is characterized by the organization of life into 'continuous labour-power continually offered on the market'. Yet, contrary to Virno, this process unfolds in the realm of actuality without bringing the potential to appearance within it. The potential negated by this act of organization is instead nothing other than life itself in its indeterminate sense that Foucault sought to highlight with his series of 'pleasure, discontinuity, festivity, rest, need, moments, chance, violence and so on'. Rather than serve as the consequence of capitalism in the political sphere, biopolitics now appears as its precondition: it is only when life as potential is negated that its 'explosive energy' becomes available for organization into labour-power.

If, as we have argued, it is philosophy, constitutively characterized by the potential for elaboration, that is particularly well-suited for elaborating the potential coexisting with the chronological actuality of the organization of labour-power, it is hardly surprising that 'philosophy of life' in the broad sense encompassing *Lebensphilosophie*, vitalism, Nietzsche, Bergson and other authors and approaches would emerge in the aftermath of this process as the attempt to explicate the potential at once negated and affirmed in the capitalist organization of labour-power (see Lebovic, 2013; Tarizzo, 2017, chapter 2; Lemke, 2011, p. 9). Moreover, since philosophical discourse is characterized by the potential to elaborate the potential unrealized in the events it addresses, this elaboration is always accompanied by its own unrealized potential. Thus, the philosophy of life that emerged alongside biopolitical government filled the lacunae arising from its own unrealized potential by retrospectively tracing its own antecedents back to the very beginning of philosophy (see, e.g. Forti, 2006). Conversely, these lacunae are also filled through a prefiguration of the future, which we may observe in the discourses, akin to Virno's own, that posit the capitalist organization of life into labour-power as the origin of the process of capture that is only revealing its full extent in our time, which is thereby posited as unlike any other (see, e.g. Hardt & Negri, 2000).

In short, Virno's theory of the temporality of historical events not only helps us understand what is at stake in the debate about the origin of biopolitics but also permits us to question his own account of its history that renders it an epiphenomenon of capitalism. By recasting labour-power in actual, chronological terms, we may instead

approach biopolitics in a more Foucauldian manner, as an 'indispensable element in the development of capitalism' (Foucault, 1990, p. 141) that conditions it without being in any way reducible to it. The 'entry of life into history' (ibid.) as its negated potential was not a consequence of the capitalist organization of labour-power but the condition that made possible both this organization and the 'aura of unresolved virtuality' that continues to animate resistance to it.

## Conclusion

The debate on the origins of biopolitics that we discussed at the beginning of the article may now be reconstructed in terms of the dual temporality of historical events. With respect to the chronological origin of biopolitical governance, the debate now appears rather asymmetrical, most observers in agreement about the dating of biopolitics to the late eighteenth early nineteenth century. Ojakangas's argument alone stands apart from this consensus, yet only if his claims about the Antiquity are read as pertaining to actual governmental practices and not their philosophical antecedents.

The discourse on the philosophical precursors of biopolitics is rather more diverse and lively, yet whether it actually constitutes a debate is somewhat doubtful. As we have seen, the discourse on antecedents does not pertain to the chronological dating of biopolitics but rather to the past potential that its historical emergence both negated and affirmed. The antecedents of biopolitics do not serve as its alternative chronological origins but rather function as means to fill the lacunae arising from the unrealized potential that accompanies its historical actuality. There can therefore be as many historical precursors to biopolitics as one wishes to identify, there being neither a need nor a possibility to adjudicate which one of them is more 'originary'. Thus, we may expect this debate to go on, with new studies appearing that would find the origin of biopolitics in, for example, Malebranche, Leibnitz or Vico, but, audacious as these readings may be, they are highly unlikely to be truly path-breaking, since they proceed along the already well-trodden path of retrospection.

These exercises in retrospection do not merely fill the lacunae in historical actuality, but also endow the precursors that incarnate past potential with an aura of virtuality, opening the possibility of new interpretations of traditional texts and familiar events. Besides embodying the potential of the present, retrospection thus grants potentiality to the past, enabling us to re-engage with both historical events and philosophical traditions in new ways. Readings of Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Spinoza, Hegel and Nietzsche from the perspective of biopolitics are therefore anachronistic not in the derogatory but in a formal or transcendental sense that characterizes historicity as such. From this perspective, the question of the origins of biopolitics is less a debate about correct dating than a conversation about the *possibilities* opened in the present by positing different precursors to biopolitics in the past. This exercise in retrospection combined with the attention to the futures prefigured by these originary moments renders the study of biopolitics a true *history of the present*, which, like every historical moment, is at once an end and a beginning.

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