

# Identity, Nature, Life

## Three Biopolitical Deconstructions

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### **Abstract**

This article examines three terms associated with the take-up of Foucault's analysis of the biopolitical, namely identity, nature and life. It argues that Foucault opposes their reduction respectively to sameness, to origin, or to some primordial force. These reductions not only fall into species of metaphysics, they fail to recognize the integration of difference and of constitutive relationality in Foucault's conceptualization of the process of subjectivation and becoming as historically dynamic and mobile. The article emphasizes the importance of historicization and of a constructive genealogy in Foucault's approach, running counter to metaphysics, and opening new avenues for political action based on the recognition of the interiority of resistance to *dispositifs* of power and of the creative force in individuation.

### **Key words**

biopower ■ the common ■ difference ■ ethics ■ genealogy ■ historicization  
■ singularity ■ way of life

THE CONCEPT of biopolitics has proved very fruitful in the last few years, since many authors in philosophy, history and right across the social and human sciences, relying on the authority of the Foucauldian toolbox, have integrated it in their analyses. I would like to proceed to a deconstruction of three of the usages to which it has been put, in spite of the Derridean overtones this term is bound to trigger. The deconstruction which I have in mind is one that sees it as a prologue to the construction of an analytical position which, by being both critical and affirmative, could thus be understood as a positive biopolitics. I would like to show that such a deconstruction, seeking an affirmative reconstruction

while being anchored in an historicization, avoids the metaphysical impasse that Agamben attributed to it, and can be a powerful tool to rethink our own relation to the present in the wake of Foucault.

In Foucault, the work of critique and that of constitution (of experiences, problematizations, research fields and conceptual tools) are not separable; their inseparability is what from the 1970s he called a genealogy. But such a genealogy cannot be conceptualized independently of a periodization that 'localizes' it in relation of the space and time of its own determination. This approach should apply to the concept of biopolitics too, given that the scope of its application has been so wide and vague, as if it were a concept that could be fixed for all time, applicable without change to Weimar Germany, the Middle Ages, the Shoah or 1968, when in fact it cannot have the universal and univocal scope imposed upon it.

I will try to show that one can interpret Foucault to claim the opposite of this universalization of the notion of biopolitics; indeed, Foucault himself tried his utmost to produce a radical critique of this position at the historical, epistemological and philosophical levels. For my deconstructive analysis, I will consider three of the terms associated with these 'Foucauldian applications' of biopolitics, namely, 'identity', 'nature', and 'life' – although terms such as 'norm', 'governmentality', 'individual' or 'population' would have served just as well.

## **Identity**

In Foucault, the critique of identity appears well before biopolitical elaborations. It appears at first in the context of the great divide between reason and unreason which is central to *Histoire de la folie (Madness and Civilization)*, where critique associates identity with the power of the *same*. Self-identity is effectively what the episteme of the classical age imposes upon us. This is because what appears as a figure of alterity – something which the same cannot recognize as belonging to it – is nevertheless defined as a variation, a deviation, a spacing in relation to it. Every identity is therefore prisoner of an identification that relates it to what it is not (as a species of the negative, the inverted double, or of exteriority); such a dialectical stratagem of captation of what should on the contrary be seen as different, non-identical and non-identitary (*non-identitaire*) is an explicit move of power, that is, an act of violence. This use of an 'inclusive exclusion' in conceptualizing identification is precisely one of the essential instruments in the functioning of modern Reason. It is therefore a matter of understanding the epistemological mechanisms through which this identity is fixed, organized, hierarchized and controlled from the point of view of knowledge (*savoir*) as much as from that of relations of power, that is, in the order of discourse as well as in the management strategies constituting the social and political order. To be identified is to be doubly and paradoxically objectified: as object and as objectified subject of discourses and practices.

Thus, from the 1960s, the radical critique of identities directs us to the analysis of power that principally takes the form of analyses of

knowledges; yet, there is also, inseparably as its other side, an interrogation of the modes of subjectivation that could attempt to escape the objective frame of power and allow non-selfsame (*non-identitaire*) subjectivities to emerge. Of course, the trace of this non-selfsame is not easily discernible in *Histoire de la folie* or in *Les Mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*), though it is quite explicit in the texts that Foucault devoted to ‘literary’ figures in the wake of his analysis of Raymond Roussel, as I have argued elsewhere (Revel, 2004). The problem then becomes that of how to prevent a subjective individuation from being immediately identified, that is, objectified and subjected to the system of knowledges/powers (*savoirs/pouvoirs*) in which it is inscribed. Later, in 1982, Foucault declared:

This form of power is exercised on the lived reality of daily life, classifying individuals into categories, designating them according to their particular individualities, binding them to their identities, imposing upon them a law of truth that must be acknowledged and that others must recognize. (Foucault, 1994c: 227)

This, I think, is the same problem that Foucault poses in relation to the elaboration of biopolitics. Indeed, from the 1970s he develops a twinned analysis of the way individuals are ‘objectivized’ by being assigned an identity as a marker of their inclusion at the level of the system of ‘individualization’ and at the level of a population. This process can also be thought of in terms of an analysis of the government of singularities through the constitution of ‘individuals’, and an analysis of the government of such individuals grouped in terms of the production of homogeneous populations; both refer to mechanisms of objectification and of identity. This twinned analysis is clear from *Surveiller et punir* (*Discipline and Punish*), for example in the analysis of the functioning of the maritime hospital, though what is missing is an account of the production of a population and its political management; also missing is the concept of norm as a new governmental instrument, deployed later in the register of biopolitics. The shift means the replacement of the conceptual vocabulary of the old juridical system of rule as expression of a sovereign will with one that points to the naturalization of the basis of power, thus to a social clinic. Subjectivation must henceforth avoid three pitfalls: that of identitarization, that of individualization and that of naturalization.

This theoretical and historical intuition is confirmed for Foucault by an event that, in a completely different context – one shifts from political economy in Europe at the end of the 18th century to the United States at the end of the 1970s – poses in fact the same type of problem and suggests the same kind of answer in avoiding these pitfalls. That event was the emergence of the gay movement, in relation to which Foucault has this to say:

Whilst from the tactical point of view it is important to be able to say ‘I am homosexual’, I think that in the long term and in the context of a wider

strategy, one should no longer pose questions about sexual identity. It is therefore not a case of confirming one's sexual identity, but of refusing the injunction of an identification in sexual terms or in different forms of sexuality. (1994c: 662)

There is for Foucault a clear distinction to be made between what the relations of power construct in the form of an identity (that is, an objectified, reified identity, reduced to a number of definite characteristics, one that becomes the object of specific practices and knowledges), and the way in which subjectivity itself constructs its relation to itself. In the first case it is a matter of a subjection that fixes identities on the basis of a number of determinations that are supposed to 'speak the truth of the subject', such as when sexuality is transformed into 'symptoms' circumscribing the individual. In the second case, the refusal of this reduction of subjectivity to identity leads Foucault to theorize another form of the relation to oneself and others, namely, in the concept of a way of life (*mode de vie*). He says:

For me, this notion of way of life is important. . . . A way of life can be shared amongst individuals of different ages, statuses, social conduct. It can give rise to intense relations that are nothing like those which are institutionalized, and it seems to me that a way of life can generate a culture and an ethics. To be gay is not about identifying oneself with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual, but to seek to define and develop a way of life. (1994c: 165)

It is clear from this statement that Foucault understands a way of life as a set of relations that does not exclude this or that difference but preserves them as such in the process of relating; it is thus the bringing into the common (*mis en commun*) of differences at the level of difference, and the constitution on this differential ground as foundation of something which is of the order of a commonality, or that partakes of differences. This is at the opposite end of all the theorizations of the relation to the other that essentially operate through a decentering of oneself towards the other – oneself as another. Foucault is trying to work out how it is possible to live the relation to the other in such a way that differences – the self, the other – are neither reified, objectified, reduced to the least common denominator (such as a contrived universalization, or a reduction to sameness), or what one must rely upon to have access to the other.

It is also clear that ethics acquires its full meaning in this understanding, since, in saying that a way of life is an ethics, Foucault implies that it is a way of being together, of being-with-others. A way of life is a gesture that constitutes a shared space, outside of any prescription, quite different from institutional spaces; it is thus the experimentation of a *polis*, that is to say, a politics. This political character of ethics in this reading is opposed to the view that the turn to ethics in Foucault in the 1980s is a turn away from politics. Ethics is not a return to 'morality', to the 'individual' or to an 'egoism'; it is instead the opening for a problematization of a commonality

that could be constituted on the basis of differences and would put them to work in a new conduct of one's life. In this view, the conduct of existence is always inclusive of a relation to others, that is, it is an apprenticeship, a mutual construction and a subjectivation. It both forbids a return to individualism (such as the idea of the individual as the free entrepreneur of him/herself) and resists every temptation towards the naturalization, substantialization or essentialization of the self.

The key point to emphasize is that when one speaks of an ethics or a politics of 'ways of life', in which subjectivation is the renewed constitution of a commonality based on differences – and thus also the core of resistance to the objectification, hierarchization or control of who we are – one implies a notion of individuals as irreducible, qualified, situated and specified singularities. Every singularity is irreducible because its emergence and becoming occurs in a determinate context, inside a web of relations and contacts that necessarily include other subjectivities also in process of becoming. New modes of life emerge as part of that process, but relations of power and the effects of *dispositifs* continue to operate. Foucault rejected the idea that there could be an outside of power, since resistance can only take place from inside a complex web in which resistance and power, subjectivation and objectification, strategies of liberation and subjection, substantialization and the logic of becoming, are interwoven.

It follows from this analysis that nothing can transform the motor of resistance – the process of becoming of subjectivity – into an impersonal force, a 'third person', or a disqualification of singularities, as indicated in some readings of Foucault in Italy; the arguments above indicate that such readings lead to a political impasse. Subjectivation in Foucault proceeds according to a complexification of what it is, given that becoming is a process that not only integrates new differences to its own initial difference, but proceeds by an increase of attributes: ontological force is at work here, so that it is a matter of a passage towards a more-than-being. In doing so it constitutes the common on the basis of the setting to work (*agencement*) of these differences which not only are preserved as such, but also enter into a differential relation with their own singularity. One does not begin as a singularity, it is because one is in a process of becoming that one has access to singularity. Because of this, I think that in some admittedly different readings of Foucault by Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito or Paolo Virno, the argument for the passage to singularity by way of a third party (which eliminates attributes), the impersonal or the pre-individual obeys nothing more than a logical necessity and rests on an error, namely the inversion of the relation between commonality and a de-subjectivized singularity. The political cost of conceptualizing the common as the reassuring residue when one removes a layer of individualization from singularity is a new post-modern metaphysics. The common is not the reassuring starting point for the production of the political but its outcome; by eliminating singularity, one eliminates what makes resistance possible. My argument instead is that the common is invented through the articulation of difference as becoming

and of subjectivation as the power of invention of shared ways of being: the common is ahead of us.

### **Nature**

Well before the lectures in the 1970s in which Foucault elaborated a biopolitical theory, he had formulated the foundation for a critique of naturalism, arguing that the latter associates nature with origin, with the universal or with a political strategy for the biologization of life that became a component of biopolitics from the 19th century. In the first two cases, the association of nature with original foundation or with a transcendent and unquestionable universal is denounced as the old basis of Western metaphysics. It must be dissolved as the first step out of the metaphysical illusion; the Nietzschean overtones of an historicization are evident when Foucault says:

History will be effective to the extent that it will introduce the discontinuous at the heart of our very being. It would split our feelings; it would multiply our body and oppose it to itself. It would leave nothing beneath oneself that would have the reassuring stability of life or nature. (1994a [1971]: 147)

The metaphysical notion of nature is what is opposed to both the discontinuous and difference, it is what immobilizes becoming.

In 1974, in a famous debate with Noam Chomsky on human nature, Foucault reaffirms his determination to critique every form of the universal, the unconditioned, or the non-historical given (while Chomsky seems to think nature in terms of invariants). Hence his suspicion of the idea that there were ‘regularities’ in the behaviours and productive activity of human beings that would exceed human history; indeed, for Foucault the historicization of regularities – in terms of their location, their measure and their classification – is a basic methodological element which he tried to develop from *Madness and Civilization*, and especially in *The Order of Things*, texts in which the slow transformation of the principles and objects of the natural sciences, say in the passage from Linnaeus to Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire, is thought fundamental. Thus he argues:

I find it difficult to accept that these regularities are tied to the human mind or its nature as condition of existence; it seems to me that, before one reaches that point, one must . . . relocate them in the domain of other human practices that are economic, technical, political, sociological, that function as the conditions of their formation, emergence, and as model. I wonder if the system of regularity, of constraint, that makes science possible is not to be found elsewhere, outside of the human mind, in social forms, in relations of production, in class struggle, etc. (1994a [1971]: 488; also in Elders, 1974)

Thus it is this experiment in historicization that one encounters in the analyses devoted to the birth of biopolitics. This approach shows that if biolitics puts to work a new form of regulation, namely the norm, that relies

on the idea of a ‘biological’ naturality of life – which social medicine claims to preserve and protect – and if biopolitics inscribes in the norm new techniques of management of both individuals and populations, it means that relations of power in the 19th century have put in place an unprecedented reference to naturality in order to transform the latter into a new instrument of control. This is not to say that nature does not exist, but that there is the emergence of a new political employment of the reference to the natural. It is this employment, as well as everything which is proposed as having universal validity with regard to ‘human nature’, that needs to be tested and examined, through a genealogy or a deconstruction. The naturalist vitalism that seems to underlie biopolitics must thus be thought of as the product of an historical moment and not as a condition of possibility for any knowledge of human beings: ‘It is history that outlines these assemblages before erasing them; one must not seek in them the raw and unchanging biological facts that would, from the depth of “nature”, impose themselves upon history’ (Foucault, 1994b [1976]: 97).

### Life

It can be seen from the above that Foucault thought it important to make clear three issues. First, life is not exclusively biological, as we saw in the discussion of ways of life as strategies of resistance in his analyses of subjectivity and ethics in the 1980s. Second, this means that powers over life or biopowers are not biological alone but include *dispositifs* of subjection and exploitation, of captation and regulation, of the control and ordering of existence in the wide sense. Third, this ‘biologization’ of life, now extended through biotechnologies and genetic engineering, appears to be, paradoxically, at the centre of some Italian readings of the biopolitical. It can be argued that the problem with the paradigm of immunity in Esposito, or, in a different register, the idea of ‘bare life’ in Agamben, is that they maintain this ambiguity in relation to life reduced to its conceptualization in biological terms. Of course, they are both careful to distinguish between *bios* and *zoē*, yet they soon claim that the characteristic proper to biopolitical power is precisely to scramble that distinction. This leaves such positions open to the objection that neither the paradigm of immunity nor the understanding of the political in terms of a body are distinguishable from a particular political thought of modernity: that of Hobbes in *Leviathan*. As for ‘bare life’, it seems to gesture towards something upon which life understood as an historico-social construct would be founded, some kind of primary core or primordial stratum, that in effect allows Agamben to operate the reduction of *bios* to *zoē*. Yet, even the way we think about the biological and ‘nature’ more generally cannot escape cultural construction, as demonstrated by Foucault’s analyses of the natural sciences in *The Order of Things*, or in anthropological deconstructions of the nature/culture opposition in anthropology (see Descola, 2006).

Foucault examines the question of life from three points of view. The first approach, tied to the valorization of the archive, consists in detecting

the traces of 'the taking of power over the ordinariness of life' (Foucault, 1994b [1977]: 245) in the fragmentary accounts of anonymous men kept in the records of the General Hospital and the Bastille in the 17th and 18th centuries. Indeed, prior to the flattening of these 'cases' in the vocabulary and descriptive apparatus of administrative procedures from the 19th century, these fragments of anonymous existence struck Foucault by their mixture of violence and poetry, of extreme dramatization and savagery, that he recovered in the project 'Parallel Lives', a series that includes the journal of Herculine Barbin. This interest in the 'lives of infamous men' (Foucault, 1994b [1977]) is motivated by the attempt to understand the interweaving of the narration of minor or insignificant lives and the strategies of power, and to express why 'the things that constitute the ordinary, the unimportant detail, obscurity, inglorious days, life in common, can and must be spoken – preferably written' (1994b [1977]: 248).

The second approach is that of biopolitics and biopowers, that is, powers over life, and is in effect the second stage of this narrativization or this putting into discourse (*mis en discours*) of life, its prolongation, but adding to this process the effects of the new forms of knowledge/power emerging from the 18th century, such as those of the police, the penal institution, psychiatry. From the 19th century, life becomes both the object and stake of these new relations of power. The at once economic, demographic and political genealogy of this new form of the government of men that Foucault constructs stresses the fact that the most intimate aspects of life, relating to sexuality, diet/food, demography and health, are co-opted in order to maximize production and minimize costs. In the 1980s, he seems to turn the definition of biopowers into a space for possible resistance, proposing that life can assert its own capacity or force (*puissance*) for creative becoming, a potential that cannot be owned by power, emerging in the very space invested by the procedures of management, control, exploitation and captation of individuals. It is life as the elaboration of the lasting differential becoming of singular differences which is also, as I noted, the renewed constitution of the common as the interweaving of differences.

The final point I want to make returns to the argument about the futility of a deconstruction that remains within the negativity of a fascination for 'lack', for the 'margin', or for philosophies of loss generally. The affirmative reconstruction to which Foucault's deconstructions direct us is the need to think biopolitics also within the framework of an affirmation of being, as a radical positivity. It would then not exclude the creative invention of forms of being, or ways of life, that is, an expressive capacity or power to act that exceeds the relations constructed by *dispositifs* of power. The dissymmetry between the powers over life and life's power of invention (*puissance d'invention*) can be seen as an 'ontology', a term that appears more frequently in Foucault's later writings. Yet this ontology is both an 'ontology of actuality' and an 'ontology of oneself', which means that it is a matter of thinking at the same time determinations and freedom, the objectivization

of singularities and the paradoxical power that the latter have, in spite of everything, to constitute themselves as subjectivities.

The opposition between power and power to act (*pouvoir et puissance*) – which is not explicit in Foucault but occurs in Deleuze in the same period – is evidenced in countless places in Foucault's references to creation and invention. Life innovates wherever power bends it to its will; it resists by putting in place strategies of resistance that are both ontological and political, aiming for a creation of more life. This is intimated in the recurrent themes in the later texts of Foucault that assert the possibility of 'making of one's life a work of art', that is, of establishing a relation to oneself and one's existence that grants a central place to 'the creation of new forms of life, relationships and friendships, in society, art, culture . . . that would be inscribed in our sexual, ethical and political choices' (Foucault, 1994c: 736). He adds: 'We should not only defend ourselves, but affirm who we are, not just as identity, but as creative force' (1994c: 736).

We know that this 'creative force' cannot exist: it is the alibi of a return to a certain postmodern 'vitalism' that a number of erroneous readings of Bergson advocate. The equally mistaken resurgence of a Nietzscheanism circumscribed by the idea of a 'vital force' and the transmutation of values goes against the grain of Foucault's borrowings from Nietzsche; for he only took from him his anti-Hegelianism and a view of history that he later crossed with the post-*Annales* school of historiography, together with a history of the sciences as reconstituted in the work of Georges Canguilhem – we are far from a return to Zarathustra . . .

We know also what that 'creative force' should be: a force (*puissance*) for subjectivation. So, if we wish biopolitics to 'pose a problem for politics', we should attend to the forms of subjectivation yet to come; as Foucault explains:

But it is however necessary to determine what it really means 'to pose a problem for politics'. R. Rorty points out that in these analyses (of the political), I do not appeal to a 'we' – to any of those 'we' whose consensus, whose values, whose traditionality constitute the framework for a thought and define the conditions in which it can be validated. But the problem is precisely that of knowing whether it is indeed from one's location inside a 'we' that one should promote the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or whether one should, in elaborating the question, prepare the ground for the possible future formation of a 'we'. It seems to me that the 'we' must not precede the question; it can only be the result – a necessarily provisional result – of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which it is formulated. (1994c: 594; Rabinow, 1984: 385)

And it is precisely this 'we' which is part of the problematization of our present, as the slow invention of a commonality yet to come as the constantly reworked space for resistant subjectivation and ways of life.

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