

# Life's politic, production of the common and life at stake...<sup>1</sup>

Políticas da vida, produção do comum e a vida em jogo...

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## Abstract

Power mechanisms stormed life in its various dimensions, from genes to dream production. Theoretical derivings from workerism autonomy, impregnated by their Espinosa, Foucault, Deleuze readings, gave another meaning to this context of expropriation, by making one see its opposite, the ontological positivity inserted into its grounds. So, they came to formulate the idea that biopower opposes Multitude biopotency. By articulating the notions of biopolitics, common production, immaterial labor and singularity, they offered a new intelligibility to contemporary processes, as well as forms of resistance emerging in them, where reversibility and reversals, in several scales, announce uncertain recompositions.

**Keywords:** Biopower; Biopolitics; Common Production; Life; Multitude.

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## Resumo

Os mecanismos de poder tomaram de assalto a vida em suas várias dimensões, dos genes à produção onírica. Teóricos oriundos da autonomia operaísta, impregnados de suas leituras de Espinosa, Foucault, Deleuze, ressignificaram esse contexto de expropriação fazendo ver seu avesso, a positividade ontológica que está na sua base. Assim, chegaram a formular a ideia de que ao biopoder se contrapõe a biopotência da Multidão. Ao articular as noções de biopolítica, produção do comum, trabalho imaterial e singularidade, ofereceram uma nova inteligibilidade aos processos contemporâneos, bem como às formas de resistência que neles emergem, ali onde reversibilidades e reversões nas mais diversas escalas anunciam recomposições ainda incertas.

**Palavras-chave:** Biopoder; Biopolíticas; Produção do Comum; Vida; Multidão.

## Preface

I want to thank this honorable invitation. I will speak about life. Not life in general, but of life in the contemporary context, before two opposing trends which force us to rethink such an old and every day more invoked issue.

The first of these trends can be expressed as follows: power has stormed life. That is, power has penetrated all spheres of existence, and mobilized and put them to work to their advantage. From genes, body, affection, psyche to intelligence, imagination, creativity, all that has been violated and invaded, mobilized and colonized, when not directly expropriated by the powers. But what are these powers? In a nutshell, putting it superficially: sciences, capital, State, media etc. But this is a very general and simple response, because power is much wider, scattered, infinitesimal, molecular than that phrase suggests. Anyway, what may be relatively new is that these powers are exercised in a positive way, that is, investing social vitality from the beginning to the end, intensifying, mobilizing and optimizing it while monitoring it from the inside, driving and integrating its elements.

Small example: the said immaterial work these days, rather than just shoes and refrigerators, mainly produces images, information, services. It requires not only strength from the workers, nor their muscles, but their intelligence, imagination and creativity, including their affection, connectivity, in short their soul and life. If these vital dimensions and their inventiveness mainly belonged to the subjective and private sphere in the past, - the maximum field of the arts, - they are today the production core element and even the main source of value. At the same time, what we consume today, beyond shoes and refrigerators, are different ways of being, of life, life forms, directions, tons of subjectivity.

Thus, from one end to another of the economic circuit, from production to consumption, what sometimes is extorted and kidnapped, sometimes invested and intensified, other times reformatted and resold, is life. One can not help wonder with that. Vampirization and commercialization of life forms may explain part of our current claustrophobia. If we used to have spaces preserved from this pervasion

or, as Marxists would say, if before we were facing a formal subsumption from society to capital, today we are facing a real subsumption, i.e., of real life to the abstract capital. Or, as they would say, from living to dead labor. If before unconscious or nature still seemed inviolable areas for Capital, as noted, for example, by Frederic Jameson (1996), today, them - the unconscious and nature - are built and put to work. If in a disciplinary society we still had the illusion of moving from an institutional sphere to another with a margin of maneuver and breathe, in a controlling society that margin seems to have vanished. To sum up, the body, psyche, language, communication, life, even faith, none of this ever preserves any externality regarding powers and can not therefore work as their balance or critical anchor in resistance to them. Power functions through an immanent manner, not outside or above anymore, but in the inside, by incorporating, integrating, monitoring, proactively investing, even those engendering possible, therefore colonizing the future.

## Life: its first and indomitable positivism

This is where the second axle that I would like to develop intervenes, especially in authors arising from Italian autonomy who, from their singular influence from Spinozism and Marxism, mingled their share of struggles to an original appropriation of Foucault and Deleuze philosophy. I summarize this axle as follows: when it seems that “everything is dominated” (“*tá tudo dominado*”), as quoted by *funk* music, at the end of the line, a reframe induces a twist resignifying this supremacy as secondary. What seemed submitted, subsumed, controlled, dominated, that is, life, reveals through a process of expropriation its first and indomitable positivity. This is not to romanticize a resistance capacity, but to rethink the relationship between powers and social vitality in the key of immanence. We could summarize this movement as follows: the power of life, biopotency, responds to the power over life, biopotency. Biopotency answers to biopower, the potency of life answers to the power over life. But this “answer” does not mean a reaction, since potency is revealed as the most intimate inside out, immanent and coextensive to power. Hence the

difficulty today to separate the wheat from the chaff, to know where we stand. This means, perhaps, that social vitality itself, when dominated by the powers which vampirize it, suddenly appears as a potency that was already there since forever, primary potency that power pursues and upon which it is constructed and anchored. First potency, life’s potency, which virtually enjoys a sovereign, constitutive, inaugural and indomitable strength. That which seemed entirely subjected to capital or reduced to mere passivity, that is, life, appears in this second reading as a capital, as the largest source of value, as an inexhaustible receptacle of meaning, forms of existence, directions that go beyond command structures and calculations of powers that thought to command it, even when these powers are exercised in the most acentered, rhizomatic, immanent ways.

Thus, living forces present in the social network stop being mere passive resources regarding an insatiable monster, to become immanent and expansive positivity, that the powers strive to regulate, modulate or control. Under this perspective, the production of the new no longer appears as exclusively subject to the dictates of capital, and much less dependent on it. Production of the new is spread everywhere and is a psychic and political potency of each and every one. According to Maurizio Lazzarato (2002), based on Gabriel Tarde: everyone and anyone invent new desires and new beliefs, new partnerships and new forms of cooperation in the city social density. Here is a unique way to read the social vitality, which requires a less reified look about domination ways, something like brushing against the grain and rediscovering the variation and strength-invention that powers intend to appropriate and that do not emanate from them. Force-invention, a key phrase that could define a certain dimension of today’s life. I said, life itself became the capital; in other words: if the ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, perceiving, living, dressing, become objects of interest and capital investment, such ways become themselves sources of value and may become themselves a vector recovery.

I will give a very concrete example: a group of Brazilian prisoners became famous for writing and recording their own music. What they were showing and selling was not only their music, not only their

stories of rugged life, but also their style, their uniqueness, perception, revolt, causticity, and way of dressing, including living in prison, gesturing, protesting; in short, their lives. Being their only capital their lives, in an extreme state of survival and endurance, that was their source of self valorization. On the Brazilian large cities outskirts, this expands at every moment: a parallel, libidinal, axiological, group or gang, aesthetics, monetary policy economy, made of these extreme lives. Of course, into a cultural entropy regime, that “commodity” interests power for its strangeness, roughness, difference, viscosity, also yet it can easily be transformed into a mere exoticism of disposable consumption. This is the case of my second example, almost a counterexample. A few years ago, I was contacted by a NGO of Indians aimed to help two Xingu tribes coming to São Paulo, which wanted to be present at the celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of the discovery of Brazil, however, in its own way, with the strength of its rite and giving an open letter to the President of that time stating that they had nothing to celebrate. I escorted the journey of such two tribes, *Xavante* and *Mehinaku*, which did not know each other - one is more warlike warrior tribe, the other is more spiritual. We traveled on a bus from *Xingu* in the Amazon forest to São Paulo for two whole days; many of them had never seen a city and in my state of “witness”, I followed their look of astonishment, fear and fascination in their wanderings by São Paulo. They wanted their presentation to caucasians to be a cultural statement gesture, a bet on their survival in the future. But how to prevent the rite and political meaning of that statement, once carried to a lighted stage, not to dilute into mere spectacle, including television? The way of life they wanted to be safeguarded and self-valued ran the obvious risk of being swallowed as folklore. That was what happened with the largest indigenous art exhibition I had the privilege of visiting with these same Indians, at Oca in Ibirapuera Park, in São Paulo. On the way out, the chief revealed, in a burst of *nietzschean tropicalism*: “All this is to show the white man’s vanity of knowledge, not the life of the Indians”. It was never so clear to me how the sterilization of a museum covers violence and genocide; the

white walls, smooth surfaces, elegant curves of metal railings, careful lighting of this beautiful building of Niemeyer, everything to hid how much each exposed object was booty of a war, there wasn’t a single drop of blood throughout the exhibition, death had been removed away from there, but also was life. In this museum concept of an indigenous culture, we find out our insatiable vampirism. I add one last example. Arthur Bispo Rosário is one of today’s leading artists in Brazil, if one can call his work an *artistic work*, done over dozens of years while in a insane asylum; he had a single obsession in life, to record his time on earth for the day of his ascension into heaven, the time for which he prepared his majestic cloak of presentation, in which is registered part of the world history. Museums, art critics, researchers, collectors, analysts, market stormed this unique life and also his direct dialogue with God and with all regions on earth, so that this heavenly mission became an object of aesthetics contemplation, as expected, though sown in the ways of conceiving the relationship between art and life in its strangeness dose.

Well, some objectives arose from these examples: an outlaw becomes a *pop star* inside prison, another just refuses the market in which he maintains a critical distance, the madman is catapulted into a museum sphere, the Indian is angered by the way the white people stuffs all signs of their lives. Grossly I would say: in all of them, life forms or life itself are in stake(s)?. But sometimes life works as a capital, as it produces value, on the other hand, it is vampirized by capital, no matter if it is called market, media or art system. When life functions as a capital, it reinvents its enunciation coordinates and varies its forms; when it is vampirized by capital, it is hit on its bare dimension, says Giorgio Agamben (2000). This is, of bare life, with which we have become, for example, in cyber cattle or cyber zombies, according to Gilles Châtelet (1998) in his book *Pensar e viver como porcos* (To think and live as pigs).

## The Multitude

One would therefore go by these two major routes that I have just presented as a Möbius strip:<sup>2</sup> bio-

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<sup>2</sup> A Möbius strip is a topological space obtained by gluing the two ends of a strip, after turning around one of them. Its properties: it is a surface with a boundary component; it is not adjustable; it only has one side and an edge; it is a path with no end or beginning, infinite, where one can go through the entire surface of the strip that appears to have two sides, but has only one.

power, biopotency, power over life and life potencies. This reversibility between life and capital and the absence of any determination between the two terms is a way to let the indeterminate relationship between them, as indeed it presents itself to our eyes today - hence also our affliction, there is nothing decided beforehand. The term *biopolitics* itself which is circulating more and more among us, has a double meaning: sometimes it designates certain forms of domination over life as defined by Foucault (1994), or just the opposite or the same seen under, namely the social vitality and its constituent power as Toni Negri (2000), inspired in part by Deleuze, overthrew such original sense in Foucault. Some authors, aiming to differentiate the two senses, call the first - domination - of leading biopolitics and the second, on the resistance, of minor biopolitics. I know it seems confusing, but it is because these two dimensions, although conceptually distinct, mingle entirely on the daily lives of our existence. Consequently, sometimes it seems preferable to take advantage of this ambiguity and instead of setting a univocal concept of biopolitics, it's about settling abruptly in this paradox, by reopening a range of ways in which the notion of life, hitherto used clearly, is pulverized and decomposes itself to infinite combinations. With such, life ceases to be defined only from the biological processes, including the collective synergy, social and subjective cooperation, and general intellect. The *biós* is extensively referred to a kind of semiotic and machinic molecular and collective emotional and economic broth, being thought in a Spinozism way as being the power to affect and be affected in the context of a very complex assemblage.

Since then, a question arises: given the power of life disseminated everywhere, given this biopotency at each corner, given that force-invention present in every place, what new life networks are possible? What new possibilities to create ties and also come away each day and in each context? What kind of communities are on the horizon? In that sense, for example, a concept like the Multitude proposed by Negri (2000) from Spinoza (2007) could help to think these emerging sociability? The mass is homogeneous, compact, follow a leader representing it, has a unique course, a single slogan. On the other hand,

the multitude is heterogeneous, plural, it is devoid of center, leader, hierarchy, even is devoid of a univocal direction, as seen in the demonstrations of June 2013 in Brazil: it was a multitude, not a mass. Now, what is common in such a heterogeneous multitude? Is this social *biós*, this vitality consists of language, sagacity, mutual affectation, extended sensory? And what does such multitude want? It was what we asked right away. The multitude wants, of course, more health, education, services, less corruption, more transparency, perhaps a political system reform. But, would it be just that or something much more radical than that? Less quantifiable, perhaps rightfully so even less negotiable, perhaps less immediately translatable in a battery of specific proposals. Perhaps what the multitude wants is also new ways to exercise its potency, to put to work its collective libido, to redesign the city logic and coexistence.

I will be back in a second to Antonio Negri (2000). He says, but not exclusively, that there is a common crisis nowadays, that some postmodern dictations understand as the end of the ordinary, as when we say, "Well, the public space has been fully privatized or language was completely expropriated by the spectacle, media, etc. " Yes, it is perfectly plausible to say that, everyday more public space is being privatized; that the language, which is what we have in common, is being expropriated by certain means of communication mechanisms more often. However, I would say that it's under the current conditions that the common is suitable to appear in its entirety and immanently, precisely because of the new current production and bio-political context. Let me explain myself: a few decades ago, the common was that abstract space combining the individualities and prevailed over them, whether as a public space, either as a policy, nation, these big compound words representing the common. Today, the common is the productive space par excellence. For example, the today's contemporary production is unthinkable without general intellect, the set of brains in cooperation, the resulting language. Even the man-machine hybridization, an extended sensory, this uninterrupted circulation flows, this collective synergy, this affective plurality, this collective subjectivity, all part of the common. After all, what is this *common* except for a set of singularities

in continuous variation? The multitude is a concept that tries to express exactly this conjunction between the common and the singular. In no way the common overlaps the singular; it is multiplicity and the variation, it is the inordinate potency of the multitude that power tries to control, tries to contain, attempts to regulate, try to adapt. As one can see, in this sense, the common has nothing to do with unity, with measure, with sovereignty, in the classic sense of the word, and has much less to do with all the pictures which claim to represent or speak on behalf of the common, the media, the politicians, the empires, hence why the resistance sometimes passes today through an exodus from certain instances trying to speak on behalf of the common. Perhaps the resistance today goes through as increasingly immanent experimentation of such a common, by the constitution from that common, new spaces and new times, the invention of new forms of cooperation and new forms of association, new desires and new beliefs, as said by Tarde (1999) in his work even in the 19th century. After all, none of this is simple.

## New desires, what mystery is this?

I will allow myself a little deviation from this enigmatic expression, even if it sounds shifted in this context.

Beatriz Preciado (2008), a Spanish author, sets the contemporary capitalism as a *drug-porn regime*. She presents how, during the twentieth century, the psyche, libido, awareness, heterosexuality, homosexuality, all this was being transformed into tangible realities, that is, chemicals, marketable molecules in bodies, in human biotypes, through an exchange gestation by pharmaceutical multinational companies. So, the success of science, she said, would be to transform depression into Prozac, masculinity into testosterone, erection into Viagra. It is a biopower molecularization, but in the typical sense. About Toni Negri and the other Italians, valued by her, she still believes that they stop when they reach the waist. She wants to go from the waist down, to be able to think the multitude: “[...] but if they were in fact insatiable bodies of the multitude, their dicks and their clitoris, anus, hormones, neuro-sexual

synapses, if the multitude’s pleasure, excitement, sexuality, seduction and the delight were the engines of such value creation in the contemporary economy, if the cooperation was a *masturbatory cooperation* and not simply a cooperation of brains. “And here comes the broader phrase:

Let’s dare the hypothesis: the real raw materials of the current production process are arousal, erection, ejaculation, pleasure and a sense of self-complacency and the omnipotent control, the real driving force of contemporary capitalism is the *drug-porn* control of subjectivity, whose products are serotonin, testosterone, antacids, cortisone, antibiotics, estradiol, alcohol and tobacco, morphine, insulin, cocaine, viagra and all such virtual-complex materials which can aid in producing mental and psychosomatics states of excitement, relaxation and discharge, of omnipotence, total control. The addict and sexual body, sex and all its semiotic and technical products, are now the main feature of the post-Fordist capitalism.”<sup>3</sup>

It’s not likely to discover a more provocative contemporary description of bio-political and capitalistic nihilism, not by chance rigorously faithful to Moebius’ logic that I highlighted in the beginning. The author draws attention, at the same time, to this matter that is being monitored and vampirized today, the orgasmic force, or in Latin, *potentia gaudendi*, which she learned when she studied in the convent school where she flirted all classmates, a kind of global power excitement of each living molecule. To think radically, such force tends to a growing increase as event, as relationship, as a practice, while practical, but yes it can be a victim of a kind of ownership as to a private or marketable object, despite its expansive and common nature. So, according to the author, if the biopower is to engross something that is not of life, but of such techno-living body, this techno... thus, what would be at stake in this force, this clash, she says, is the orgasmic force that precisely can not be thought just as being inert or a passive matter, except in her *drug-porn* reduction, there where it is entirely expropriated as bare life, as said by Agamben (2000).

3 Preciado, B. Testo Yonqui. To be published by n-1edições.

It is obvious that Beatriz Preciado's description spikes in the flesh of such, since it runs a bit of biobody latitude, dealing with what she calls *ejaculating* profit, from which whole masses of the planet would be excluded for now, for good and for bad. In any case, apart from the vivid description of a context that our modesty has difficulty in naming, the author had the merits, among others, to offer her own body as a laboratory in which she voluntarily experienced the drift of sensitivity and eroticism, from an intoxication protocol with testosterone gel. She explains that her book on the issue can be read as a kind of manual of bioterrorism on the molecular scale, or simply as an exercise of disassembly and reassembly subjectivity.

### Concluding with desire...

How the desire virtualities are sometimes crushed by a social mega-machine? Says a philosopher: the desire is the irrational of all rationality, the desire implies a rupture of causality, if there are events that we do not understand according to a causal series, it is necessary an inexplicable break, not because it is the mystery order, but because it is the desire nature to cause breaks in causal series, as the desire sometimes broke with the logic of causes and goals.

Then, there is a subversive and explosive dimension in desire. There are libidinal, collective chords, of multitude. And the desire of such a multitude no one can stop, we saw how difficult it was, police everywhere, everyone frightened, where may it lead? Nobody knows, nobody knows; something in the desire of such a multitude is the imponderable order, there are times when it seems that everything is possible. And that's what has been kidnapped from us sometimes, the same idea of what is possible, that something is possible or that something else

is possible. That was systematically abducted from us. So, when there is an event in which this dimension is reintroduced, the "everything is possible", something happened, the continuity of historical time was broken. It is the force that Nietzsche (1987) called as being untimely. A collection of desires which throws it all away, many of such things which poisoned our lives.

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