BIOPOLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY

More than fear or hope, perhaps surprise is what recent international events have made us feel. Before they turn out to be positive, negative, or even tragic, international events are first and foremost unexpected. Moreover, they seem to contradict all reasonable calculation of probability. From the sudden and bloodless collapse of the Soviet system in 1989 to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and everything that followed, what we can say at a minimum is not only that we couldn't have imagined them before they occurred but that everything appeared to make their occurrence unlikely. Naturally, every collective event carries a certain degree of unpredictability, as history always shows. And yet, even when we are dealing with major discontinuities, such as revolutions or wars, one may always say that paving the way for these events, or at least allowing them, were various conditions that certainly made them possible, if not probable. We might say the same about the forty years that followed the end of the Second World War, when the world's bipolar order left no margin for the unforeseen to occur, to the point that what was taking place in each of the two blocks appeared to be the almost automatic result of a game all of whose moves were well-known and predictable.

All of this—that is, this political order that seemed bound to govern international relations for many years to come—suddenly burst: first in the form of implosion (in the case of the Soviet system) and then in an explosion (in the case of terrorism). Why? How can we explain the sudden change, and where exactly does it come from? The most frequent response has to do with the end of the Cold War and the advent of globalization that followed. Put this way, we risk mistaking cause for effect, offering as an explanation

something that instead requires explanation. Even the recent hypothesis of the so-called clash of civilizations names an emergency, or at least the presence of risk in the most dramatized terms, yet it does not allow an adequate interpretation. Why in the world would civilizations (if we want to use such a rigid term), after having lived together peacefully for more than half a millennium, today threaten to clash with catastrophic results? Why is international terrorism spreading so perniciously? And why are Western democracies seemingly incapable of meeting it without resorting to instruments and strategies that over the long term undermine these democracies' founding values? The typical answer, namely the growing crisis of democratic institutions and the difficulty of marrying individual and collective rights, freedom and security, also remains within an interpretive circle that instead should be opened. The impression is that we're continuing to move within a semantics that's no longer capable of interpreting contemporary reality, or that in any case we remain on the surface or at the margins of a much deeper movement. The truth is that as long as we stand pat with this excessive classical language of rights, democracy, and freedom, we won't be able to recognize the newness of the situation, whose radical novelty puts the preceding period in a different light. What doesn't work in the answers provided, more than the individual conceptual references, is the overall framework within which references are situated. Within such a framework, how can we understand the choice of suicide for kamikaze terrorists, or even the antinomy of so-called humanitarian wars that end up devastating the very populations that they aim to save? How do we reconcile the idea of preventive war with the option of peace shared by all democratic states, or even with the secular principle of not interfering in the affairs of other sovereign states? The entire structure of modern political categories is of no help, as it hinges upon a bipolarity between individual rights and state sovereignty, which makes a resolution impossible. It's not merely a question of whether the lexicon is appropriate or not, or whether the perspective works or doesn't but rather has to do with the real effect of concealing: It's as if that lexicon wound up hiding something else behind its semantic curtain, another scene or logic that has been emerging, but has only recently come to light so explosively. What is this other scene, this logic or object that modern political philosophy cannot express and which it tends to hide?

My feeling is that we must touch on that ensemble of events which, at least since the time of Michel Foucault's work (though actually emerging a decade or so before him), was called biopolitics. Without pausing here to write a genealogy of the concept,[1] and not wanting to reflect on the various meanings that biopolitics acquired over time (and even within Foucault's *oeuvre* itself), we can say that, in its most general formulation, biopolitics refers to the increasingly intense and direct involvement established between political dynamics and human life (understood in its strictly biological sense), beginning with a phase that we can call second modernity. Of course we know that politics has always had something to do with life—that life, even in the biological sense, has always constituted the material frame within which politics is necessarily inscribed. How can we fail to place the agrarian politics of the ancient empires, or the politics of hygiene and sanitation developed in Rome, within the category of the politics of life? And doesn't the ancient regime's corporeal domination of slaves, or more still, the power of life or death exercised on prisoners of war imply a direct and immediate relationship between power and *bíos*? Furthermore, Plato, in particular in the *Republic*, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, advises eugenic practices that go as far as to advocate the infanticide of babies suffering from weak constitutions. Yet, none of this is enough to locate these events and texts within a properly biopolitical orbit. The reason? Because, in the ancient and medieval periods, preserving life as such was never the primary objective of political action, as it was to become in the modern era. As Hannah Arendt reminded us, a preoccupation with the maintenance and reproduction of life for some time actually was part of a sphere that was neither political nor public but economic and private until real political action took on meaning and importance precisely in contrast to it.

Perhaps it's with Hobbes, and in the era of the religious wars, that the question of life embeds itself in the very heart of political theory and practice. The Leviathan State is instituted in defense of life, and subjects hand over the powers they naturally possess in exchange for protection by the state in the name of life. All of Hobbes's political categories (not to mention those of the authoritarian or liberal writers who succeed him)—namely sovereignty, representation, the individual—are in reality simply linguistic and conceptual modalities for naming or translating the biopolitical question of safeguarding human life from the dangers of violent extinction that

threaten it into politicophilosophical terms. Therefore, we might even go so far as to say that it wasn't that modernity posed the question of the self-preservation of life but rather that life brings into being, or "invents," modernity as the complex of categories capable of answering the question of the preservation of life. What we call modernity, in other words, taken as a whole, might be nothing more than the language that allowed us to give the most effective answers to a series of requests for self-protection that sprang forth from the very foundations of life.[2] Here such a demand for salvific narratives such as, for example, the social contract, would have been born and would have become increasingly pressing as the defenses that until then had constituted the symbolic shell protecting human experience (beginning with the theological perspective of transcendence) began to grow weaker. Once these natural defenses rooted in common sense—this sort of primitive immunitary wrapping—had failed, an additional, now artificial, *dispositif* was needed to protect human life from risks that had become increasingly unbearable, such as those caused by civil wars or foreign invasions. Because he was projected toward the outside in a way that had never before been experienced, modern man required a series of immunitary apparatuses to protect a life made identical to itself from the secularization of religious references. Here, traditional political categories, such as order, but also freedom, take on meaning that forces them ever more toward the shelter of security measures. Freedom, for example, ceases to be understood as participation in the political management of the *pólis* and is now recast in terms of personal security along a fault line that follows us to this very moment: Free is he who is able to move without fearing for his life and property.

This doesn't mean, however, that we're still working today within the field of inquiry that Hobbes gave birth to, nor does it mean that his categories can be employed in the current situation; if it were otherwise, we wouldn't find ourselves facing a need to propose a new political language. Actually, between the era that we can generically call modern and our own, we find a sharp discontinuity that we can locate in the first decades of the twentieth century, when true biopolitical reflection gains a foothold. What is this difference? In the first modernity, the relationship between politics and the preservation of life (as Hobbes understood it) was still mediated, filtered through a paradigm of order that is expressed within the previously mentioned concepts of sovereignty, representation, and indi-

vidual rights. In the second phase (which, in different and inconsistent ways, we still are a part of), that mediation has progressively disappeared, and in its place we have a greater overlapping of politics and *bíos*. Signaling this shift is the greater weight that the politics of public health, demography, and urban life have within the logic of the government beginning as early as the end of the eighteenth century. This is, however, merely the first step toward a biopoliticization of all societal relationships. Foucault analyzed various key points along this process of the governmentalization of life—that is, from so-called pastoral power, tied to the Catholic practice of confession, to *raison d'état* and the knowledge practices of the "police," which at one time included all the practices that aimed at material well-being.[3] From that moment on, the maintenance, development, and expansion of life becomes of strategic political relevance. Life is decisively put into play in political conflicts. At the same time, politics itself begins to be shaped according to biological and especially medical models.

We all know that this comingling of political and biomedical languages enjoys a long history. Consider, for example, the millennium-long duration of the "political body," or just the political terms that come to us from biological ones, like *nation* or *constitution*. But the double and crisscrossing politicization of life and the biologization of politics that unfolds at the opening of the twentieth century means something else as well, not only because life increasingly moves to the heart of the political game but because, under certain conditions, this biopolitical vector is turned into its thanatopolitical opposite, thereby linking the battle for life to a practice of death. This is the question that Foucault baldly poses when he asks a question that continues to interpellate us today: How does a politics of life continually threaten to become a practice of death?[4] Such a result was already implicit in what I called the immunitary paradigm of modern politics, by which I meant the growing tendency to protect life from the risks that inhere in the relationship among men and women even at the cost of ending communitarian bonds (which is what Hobbes describes, for example).[5] In the same way that someone is protected beforehand from contagion, a portion of the disease is injected into the very body that one intends to protect; in social immunization, life is guarded in a form that negates what is life's most intense shared meaning. Yet a truly fatal leap occurs when this immunitary turn in biopolitics intersects with the trajectory of nationalism, and then racism. Then, the question of conserving life shifts from the individual

(typical of the modern period) to that of the nation-state as well as the population, which is seen as an ethnically defined body placed in opposition to other states and other populations. As soon as the life of a racially characterized people is viewed as the supreme value to keep in line with its originary constitution (or even to expand beyond those borders), obviously the lives of other peoples and other races tend to be felt as an obstacle and are therefore to be sacrificed to the life of that racially defined people. *Bíos* is thus artificially cut by a series of thresholds in zones of varying value that subordinate part of it to the violent and destructive domination of the other.

The one philosopher who understood this most radically, in part because he made it his own point of view, and in part because he criticized its nihilistic results, is Nietzsche. When he talks about the will to power as the very foundation of life, or when he places the very body of individuals at the center of interhuman dynamics and not conscience, he makes life the sole subject and object of politics. The fact that life is the will to power for Nietzsche means not that life wants power or that power determines life from the outside but that life knows no other way of being than a continual strengthening [*potenziamento*]. What condemns modern institutions—that is, the state, Parliament, the political parties—to inefficiency is their incapacity to locate themselves at this level of the discourse. Nietzsche, however, doesn't stop there. The extraordinary importance as well as the risk of his perspective on biopolitics lies not only in his having placed biological life, the body, at the center of political dynamics but also in the absolute lucidity with which he foresees that the definition of human life—the decision about what constitutes a true human life—will become the most crucial object of conflict in the centuries to come. When he asks in a well-known passage, "why shouldn't we be able to accomplish with human beings what the Chinese have learned to do with trees—that it carries roses on one side and pears on the other?" we have before us an extremely delicate transition from a politics of the administration of biological life to one able to glimpse the possibility of life's artificial transformation.[6] Human life here becomes the terrain of decisions that have to do with not only its external thresholds—that is, what distinguishes it from animal or vegetal life, for example—but also inner thresholds. This means that politics will be allowed to, will even be asked to, decide what is a biologically better life, and also

how to strengthen it through the use, the exploitation, or, when necessary, the death of a "worse" life.

Twentieth-century totalitarianism, but especially that of the Nazis, signals the apex of this thanatopolitical drift. The life of the German people becomes the biopolitical idol for which every other people who were seen as contaminating and weakening that life from within will be sacrificed (in particular this meant the Jewish people). Never more than here did the immunitary *dispositif* register such an absolute convergence between the protection and the negation of life. The supreme strengthening of the life of a race that pretends to be pure is paid for with the large-scale production of death: first that of others, and, finally, in the moment of defeat, of their own, as is demonstrated by the order of self destruction signed by a Hitler under siege in his Berlin bunker. As in so-called autoimmune diseases, here too the immune system is strengthened to the point of fighting the very body that it should be saving, but it is now causing that body's decomposition. It makes little sense to obscure the absolute specificity of what happened in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. The category of totalitarianism, however valuable it was for calling attention to certain connections between antidemocratic systems of the time, risks erasing, or at a minimum shading over, the irreducible character of Nazism not only with respect to modern political categories (of which Nazism signals their collapse) but also with regard to Stalinist communism.

While Stalinist communism may still be seen as an explosive extreme of the philosophy of modern history, Nazism lies entirely outside not only modernity but the philosophical tradition of modernity. Yet it does have its own philosophy, but it is completely translated into biological terms.[7] Nazism was not, as communism wished to be, the fulfillment of philosophy. Rather Nazism was the realization of biology. If the transcendental—that is, the constitutive category from which all others derive—of communism is history, for Nazism that category is life, understood from the point of view of a comparative biology that distinguishes between human races and animal ones. This explains the absolutely unprecedented role that both anthropologists, working side by side with zoologists, and doctors played in Nazism. For the former, the politically central role of anthrozoology resulted from the importance that Nazis awarded the category of *humanitas* (in fact, a celebrated handbook of racial politics had this very name),[8] which was

continually re-elaborated through the definition of biological thresholds between worthy and unworthy lives, as the infamous book on "life unworthy of life" suggests.[9] For the latter, the direct participation of doctors in all the phases of the genocide, namely from the selection of the camp slopes to the final cremation of prisoners, is well known and widely documented. As we can deduce from their declarations about the various activities in which they were involved, medical doctors understood their death work to be the very mission of the doctor: curing the German body from a grave illness by eliminating the infected part and the invasive germs once and for all. To their eyes, this work was a great disinfestation, necessary in a world besieged by biological degeneration, in which the Jewish race constituted the most lethal element.

From this perspective, Nazism establishes an element of rupture and also a pivot within biopolitics. Nazism carried that element to its point of greatest antinomy, summed up in the principle that life is protected and developed only by progressively enlarging the sphere of death. Nazism also radically alters the logic of sovereignty. Whereas, at least in its classical formulation, only the sovereign maintains the right to life and death of his subjects, all citizens of the Reich are endowed with this right. If it's a question of the racial defense of the German people, all can legitimately, and indeed are even required to, bring about the death of all others and ultimately, if the situation requires it (as in the moment of final defeat), even their own deaths. Here the defense of life and the production of death truly meet at a point of absolute indistinction. The sickness that the Nazis wanted to eliminate was the death of their own race. This is what they wanted to kill in the bodies of Jews and all others who seemed to threaten from within and without. Furthermore, they considered that infected life dead already. Thus, the Nazis did not see their actions as actual murder. They merely reestablished the rights of life by restoring an already dead life to death, giving death to a life that had always been inhabited and corrupted by death. They made death, rather than life, both the therapeutic object and the therapeutic instrument. This explains why they always had a cult of their own ancestors—because, in a biopolitical perspective that had been completely turned into thanatopolitics—only death could have the role of defending life from itself, by making all life submit to the regime of death. The fifty million deaths produced by the Second World War represent the inevitable outcome of such logic.

Nevertheless, this catastrophe did not spell the end of biopolitics, which corroborates what I noted above—namely that, in its various configurations, biopolitics has a history that is much vaster and older than Nazism, even though Nazism would appear to carry biopolitics to its extreme. Biopolitics is not a product of Nazism; if anything, Nazism is the paroxysmal and degenerated product of a certain kind of biopolitics. This is a point that's worth remembering, because biopolitics can cause, and has caused, numerous misunderstandings. Contrary to the illusions of those who imagined it was possible to retroactively skip over what for them amounted to the Nazi parenthesis so as to reconstruct the governing principles of the preceding period, life and politics are bound together in a knot that can't be undone. The period of peace (at least in the Western world) that followed the Second World War nourished this illusion. The fact that even the peace—or rather nonwar, as was the case for the Cold War—that followed was founded upon a balance of terror underpinned by the atomic bomb, and therefore fell entirely within an immunitary logic, mattered little. All it did was defer by a few decades what would have happened sooner or later. Indeed the collapse of the Soviet system, which some interpreted as the final victory of democracy over its potential enemies, if not the end of history itself, marked instead the end of that illusion. The knot binding politics and life together, which totalitarianism tightened with destructive consequences for both, is still before our eyes. We might even say that this knot has become the very epicenter of every politically significant dynamic. We see it in the increasing importance of ethnicity in international relations to the impact of biotechnologies on the human body, from the centrality of health care as the most important index of how efficient economic-productive systems are to the priority that security measures enjoy in all government programs. Politics seems to be more and more made one with the bare ground of biology, if not with the very body of citizens in every part of the world. The increasing indistinction between norm and exception that results from indiscriminantly extending emergency legislation, together with the growing influx of migrants stripped of all juridical identity and subjected to direct screening by the police, marks an additional step in the biopolitical. We really ought to reflect on these world events outside the context of globalization. One might even say that, contrary to what Heidegger and Hannah Arendt believed with their respective differences, the question of life cannot be separated from that of the world. The philosophical

idea (coming to us from phenomenology) of the "life-world" is thus overturned symmetrically to become "world-life," by which I mean that the entire world seems increasingly to be a body united by a single global threat that holds it together and at the same time risks smashing it to pieces. Unlike previous periods, no longer can one part of the world (America, Europe) be saved while another self-destructs. A single destiny binds the world, the whole world, and its life. Either the world will find a way to survive together, or it will perish as one.

The events set in motion by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 do not constitute, as many argued, the beginning but instead the detonation of a process that started with the end of the Soviet system, which was the last *katechon* inhibiting the world's self-destructive urges, thanks to the vice of reciprocal fear. Here, when this last wall that had given the world a dual form came to an end, biopolitical dynamics no longer seemed capable of being halted or contained. The war in Iraq signals the height of this drift of the biopolitical, given both the motivations for starting it and for how the war was and is still being carried out. The idea of a preventive war radically shifts the terms of the debate with respect to both wars waged and the so-called Cold War. For the latter, it is as if the negative part of the immunitary procedure is multiplied to such a degree that it occupies the entire frame. War thus becomes no longer the exception, a last resort, or the ever-present opposite of existence but the sole form of global coexistence, the constitutive category of existence today. Not surprisingly, the consequence is a disproportionate multiplication of the very risks that we wanted to avoid. The most obvious result is the complete superimposition of opposites: peace and war, attack and defense, life and death, in which each weighs more and more on the other.

If we pause to look more closely at the homicidal and suicidal logic of terrorist practices today, we quickly see an additional step with respect to Nazi thanatopolitics. No longer does only death make a dramatic entrance into life, but now life itself is constituted as death's instrument. What is a kamikaze, truly, if not a fragment of life hurled upon other lives in order to produce death? And don't terrorist attacks aim ever more at women and children, the very sources of life? The barbarism of decapitating hostages seems to bring us back to the premodern age of punishments in the public square, with a touch of the hypermodern constituted by the planetary Internet booths where we can see such a spectacle. The virtual, which is anything

but in opposition to the real, constitutes here the real's most concrete manifestation in the very body of the victims and in the blood that seems to spurt onto the screen. Today, as never before, politics is practiced on the bodies, in the bodies, of unarmed and innocent victims. Yet even more significant in the current biopolitical drift is that the prevention of mass terror itself tends to absorb and reproduce the very modalities of terror. How else are we to read tragic episodes like the massacre that took place at the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow, where the police used lethal gas on both terrorists and hostages? And isn't the torture that is widely practiced in Iraqi prisons a perfect example of politics acting on life [*politica sulla vita*], halfway between the incision of the condemned's body in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" and the beastialization of the enemy that comes to us from the Nazis?[10] The fact that in the recent Afghanistan war the same airplanes dropped bombs and food rations on the same populations is perhaps the most tangible sign of the nearly complete identity between the defense of life and the production of death.

Is this how biopolitical discourse ends? Is the only possible outcome of such events such an overlapping, or is there another way of practicing, or at least thinking, biopolitics, which is to say a biopolitics that is ultimately affirmative, productive, and removed from death's nonstop presence? In other words, is a politics no longer *over* life [*sulla vita*] but *of* life [*della vita*] imaginable? If it is, then how should it, how might it, take shape? First, a clarification. Despite the legitimacy of political philosophy as an area of study, I'm wary of any easy short circuit between philosophy and politics. Their co-implication cannot be resolved by looking to a complete superimposition; I don't believe that philosophy's task is to offer models of political institutions or that, conversely, biopolitics can become a revolutionary or, depending on your taste, reformist manifesto. My feeling is that a much longer and clearer path is needed, one that includes a decidedly philosophical effort toward a new conceptual elaboration. If, as Deleuze believes, philosophy is the practice of creating appropriate concepts for the event that touches and transforms us, this is the moment to rethink the relationship between politics and life in a way that, instead of making life subject to the direction of politics, as took place over the course of the last century, we ought to introduce the power [*potenza*] of life into politics.[11] The key is relating to biopolitics not from outside but from within biopolitics, until we are able to bring something to the surface that until today has been crushed by

its opposite. We have no recourse except to refer to this opposite if only so as to establish a starting point through contrast. In *Bíos*, I chose the most difficult path, at whose beginning is the site of the most extreme and lethal drift of biopolitics (Nazism) and its thanatopolitical *dispositifs*. I began my search there from within these paradigms in search of the keys for the doors opening to a different politics of life. I realize how vexing this might sound to some, attempting to employ such a contrast using a common sense term that for a long period has attempted, consciously or unconsciously, to dismiss the question of Nazism, or of what Nazism understood and unfortunately practiced as the politics of the *bíos* (even though, having recourse to the Aristotelian vocabulary, we ought in this case to speak of *zoé*). The three lethal apparatuses of Nazism that I've worked on are the absolute normalization of life, or the imprisonment of *bíos* within the law of its own destruction; the double enclosure of the body, or the homicidal and suicidal immunization of the German people within the figure of a single, racially purified body; and, finally, the suppression of birth in advance, as a way of cancelling life at the very moment of its emergence. To these apparatuses I contrasted not something from the outside but their exact opposite: a conception of a norm that is immanent to bodies, not imposed upon them from outside, a break with the closed and organic idea of a political body in favor of the multiplicity of "flesh of the world," and finally a politics of birth understood as the continual production of difference in terms of identity. Without wanting to discuss these areas again in detail, I orient them toward an unprecedented joining of a language of life and a political form through philosophical reflection. How much all of this can carry us forward toward an affirmative biopolitics is still anyone's guess. What interested me was highlighting the traces, unraveling some of the threads, and shedding light on some of the darker areas that might help us glimpse something that we still can't make out clearly.

NAZISM AND US

1933–2003. Is it legitimate to turn once again to the question of Nazism seventy years after it took power? The answer, I believe, can only be yes: not just because forgetting Nazism would represent an unbearable offense for its victims but also because, despite an ever increasing body of literature, something about Nazism remains in the dark, something that touches us. What might it be? What links us invisibly to what we point to as the most tragic political catastrophe of our time, and perhaps of all time? My own sense is that this thing that both troubles and evades us remains locked up within the concept of totalitarianism. Naturally, we know how much this concept, especially in Hannah Arendt's formulation, has helped shed light on the radical turn that took place in the 1920s in the institutional, political and ethical order of the preceding era.[1] And yet the very concept of totalitarianism ends up eliding, or at least shading over, the specificity of the Nazi event with respect to other experiences relegated to the same category—above all, that of Soviet communism. Clearly this does not mean that nothing crosscuts the two phenomena: mass society, constructivist violence, generalized terror, and so forth. But this all-too-obvious link does not reach the deepest layer of Nazism that's inassimilable to every other event of the near or remote past.

From such a perspective, a profound difference between the two "totalitarianisms" is revealed in their relationships to what we call modernity: While communist totalitarianism, even in its typicality, springs forth from modernity's womb—that is, from within its own logics, dynamics, and drifts—the Nazi variant signals a drastic change of course. It is born not from a carrying to the extreme but from a decomposition of the modern

form. This is not because Nazism doesn't contain elements, fragments, or shards of modernity but because Nazism restores or translates them into an absolutely new conceptual language that is completely irreducible to the political, social, and anthropological parameters of the previous, modern lexicon. If one can always say that communism "realizes" a philosophical tradition that belongs to modernity in some (however exasperated and extreme) way, it's in no way possible to say the same about Nazism. Therefore, even more than other, more contingent incompatibilities, Nazism's encounter with Heidegger's philosophy swiftly proved itself to be a terrible misunderstanding for both. But precisely because Nazism lies entirely outside of modern language, because it is situated decidedly *after* it, Nazism embarrassingly brushes up against a dimension that is part of our experience as postmoderns. Contrary to what certain common-sense speech declares, we are operating no longer within the reverse side [*rovescio*] of communism but within that of Nazism. This is our *question*, the monster that stalks us not only from behind but also from our future.

How so? We've said that Nazism is not philosophy realized as is communism. But this is only a half truth that we should complete as follows: It is actually *biology* realized. If communism has history as its transcendental, class as its subject, and economy as its lexicon, Nazism has life as its transcendental, race as its subject, and biology as its lexicon. Certainly, communists also maintained that they were acting according to a precise scientific vision, but only Nazis identified that science as the comparative biology of human races. From this perspective, we must accept Rudolph Hess's declarations that "National Socialism is nothing but applied biology."[2] Actually, the expression was used for the first time by the geneticist Fritz Lenz in the widely circulated *Rassenhygiene* manual (written alongside Erwin Baur and Eugen Fischer)—a text in which Hitler was defined as "the great German doctor" capable of carrying out "the final step in the defeat of historicism and in the recognition of purely biological values."[3] Furthermore, Hitler himself had declared in *Mein Kampf* that "if the power to fight for one's own health is no longer present, the right to live in this world of struggle ends."[4] In another influential medical text, Rudolph Ramm named the "physician of the *Volk*" a "biological soldier" in the service of the "great idea of the of the National Socialist biological state structure."[5] Medical power and military power [*potere*] refer to one another, added Kurt Blome (deputy to Reich Health Leader Leonardo Conti) in his 1942 *Arzt im Kampf* [*Physi-*

cian in Struggle]—because both are engaged in the final battle for the life of the Reich.

We must be careful not to lose sight of the specific quality of the biological, and more specifically medical, semantics deployed by the Nazis. Interpreting politics in biomedical terms, and, inversely, attributing political significance to biomedicine meant placing oneself on a radically different horizon from that of the entire modern tradition because, in Ramm's words, "National Socialism, differently from any other political philosophy or party program, aligns itself with natural history and human biology."[6] It's true that the political lexicon uses and incorporates biological metaphors, beginning with the long-standing one of the state-body. And it's also true, as Foucault has brought to light, that beginning in the eighteenth century the question of life progressively intersected more and more with the sphere of political action. The same ideas of *National-Biologie* or *biologische Politik* are rooted in the culture of the German Empire and the Weimar Republic.[7] Yet we have before us a phenomenon that's quite different in both scope and significance. In a certain way, the metaphor becomes real—not in the sense that political power is given directly to doctors and biologists (although this did happen in more than one case)—but in the more urgent sense that political officials assumed a medical-biological principle as the guiding criteria of their actions. We are therefore not talking about mere instrumentalization: Nazi politics was not limited to wielding the biomedical research of the times to legitimate itself; rather, the former attempted to identify itself directly with latter.[8] When Hans Reiter, speaking in the name of the Reich of occupied Paris, declared that "this way of thinking in biological terms must eventually be adopted by the entire people," because with them the "substance" of the very "body of the nation" was at stake, he was well aware that he was speaking in the name of something that had never been part of modern conceptual language. This is why today, even in the twilight of modernity, we are directly implicated.[9]

Only in this way can we explain the tight web that was woven over the course of those horrifying twelve years between politics, law, and medicine, whose final outcome was genocide. Certainly, the participation of the medical class in thanatopolitical practice was a characteristic not only of Nazism. We all know the role of psychiatrists in diagnosing dissidents with mental illness in the Gulags of the Soviet Union, as well as the role of Japanese doctors who performed vivisections on American prisoners. Still, in

Germany the situation was different. Here, I'm not only speaking about the experiments on "human guinea pigs" or about the collections of Jewish skulls sent directly from the camps to anthropological institutes. We know about the generous anatomic gifts sent from Mengele to his teacher Otmar von Verschuer, who is still considered one of the founders of modern genetics. We've even witnessed the verdict of a tribunal, and the institution of the Nuremburg Code protecting human subjects, which came out of the trial of the doctors who were held directly responsible for murder.[10] But the paltry sentences in relation to the enormity of the act testifies to the fact that the problem was not so much determining the individual responsibility of doctors (which would have been inevitable) but defining the overall role medicine played in Nazi ideology and practice. Why was medicine the profession that, more than any other, supported the regime so unconditionally? And why did the regime grant doctors such an extensive power over life and death? Why did it seem to hand the physician the sovereign's scepter and, before that, the clergyman's book?

When Gerhard Wagner, führer of German doctors before Leonardo Conti, said that the physician, "should go back to his origins, he should again be a priest, he should become priest and physician in one," he simply affirms that ultimately only the physician reserves the right to judge who is to be kept alive and who will be condemned to death.[11] The physician alone possesses the definition of valid life, a valued life, and therefore only he can set the limits beyond which life can legitimately be extinguished. The many doctors valorized by the regime did not hesitate to accept its mandates and to carry them out with swift efficiency: from the selection of children and then of adults destined for the "merciful death" of the T4 program to the extension of what was continually called "euthanasia" to prisoners of war (the 14f13 project), to the enormous *Therapia magna auschwitzciense*—the selection on the ramp leading into the camp, the start of the process of gassing, the declaration of death [*decesso*], the extraction of gold teeth from cadavers, and the overseeing of cremation. No step in the production of death escaped their control. According to the precise instructions issued by Viktor Brack, head of the Euthanasia Department of the Reich Chancellery, only physicians had the right to inject phenol into the hearts of "degenerates" or to open the gas valve for the final "shower." If ultimate power wore the boots of the SS, *auctoritas* wore the white coat of the doctor. Even the cars that transported Zyklon B to Birkenau bore the sign of the Red

Cross and the inscription that stood out at the entrance to Mathausen was "Cleanliness and Health." In the no-man's-land of this new theo-bio-politics, physicians had truly become once again the priests of Baal, who after millennia found themselves before their ancient Jewish enemies and could devour them at will. It's been widely noted that Auschwitz-Birkenau was the world's largest genetics laboratory.[12]

We also know that the Reich knew how to generously compensate its doctors—not only with professorships and honors but with something even more concrete. If Conti reported directly to Himmler, the surgeon Karl Brandt, who had already been charged with the euthanasia operation, became one of the regime's most powerful officers. His limitless jurisdiction included the life and death of all and he was subject only to the supreme authority of the Führer. Not to mention Irmfried Eberl, who was "promoted" at thirty-two to commander of Treblinka. Does this mean that all German physicians, or even only those who supported Nazism, consciously sold their souls to the devil? Were they simply butchers in white coats? Although it may be convenient to think so, this wasn't necessarily the case. Not only was German medical research among the most advanced in the world (Wilhelm Hueper, the father of professional American carcinogenesis, asked the Nazi minister of culture Bernhard Rust to return to work in the "new Germany") but Nazis launched the most powerful campaign of the period against cancer by restricting the use of asbestos, tobacco, pesticides, and colorants, encouraging the distribution of organic and vegetarian foods, and alerting people to the potentially carcinogenic effects of X-rays (which they used in the meantime to sterilize women who weren't worth the cost of a salpingectomy). At Dachau, while the chimney smoked, organic honey was being produced. Moreover, Hitler himself detested smoking, and was a vegetarian and animal lover besides being scrupulously attentive to hygiene.[13]

What does all of this decidedly obsessive attention to public health (which had significant effects on the death-from-cancer rate in Germany) suggest? Between this therapeutic attitude and the thanatological frame in which it is inscribed, there was not only a contradiction but a profound connection. Insofar as doctors were obsessively preoccupied with the health of the German body, doctors made a deadly incision (in the surgical sense) in the flesh of that body. In short, though it may seem tragically paradoxical, German doctors became executioners of those they considered inessential or harmful to the improvement of public health in order to carry out their therapeutic

mission. From this point of view, we are compelled to argue that genocide was the result of not the absence but the presence of a medical ethics that was perverted into its opposite. It does not suffice to say that in the biomedical vision of Nazism the border between healing and murder was breached. We must instead conceive of them as two sides of the same project, which made one the necessary condition of the other: Only by murdering as many people as possible could they heal those who represented the true Germany. From this perspective, it even appears plausible that at least some Nazi physicians truly believed they were respecting in content, if not in form, the Hippocratic oath to do no harm to the patient. Yet they identified the patient as, rather than a single individual, the German people as a whole. Caring for the German people required the mass death of all those who threatened its health by simply existing. In this sense, we ought to defend the claim I advanced earlier that Nazism's transcendental is life, rather than death—even if, paradoxically, death was considered the only medicine capable of conserving life. "The Nazi message—for victims, for possible observers, and mostly for themselves—was: all our killing is medical, medically indicated, and carried out by doctors."[14] With Telegram 71, in which Hitler ordered, from his Berlin bunker, the destruction of the means of subsistence of the German people who had shown their weakness, the limit point of the Nazi antinomy suddenly became clear: The life of some, and ultimately of one, is sanctioned only by the death of everyone.[15]

We know that Michel Foucault interpreted this thanatopolitical dialectic in terms of biopolitics: As soon as power [*potere*] takes up life itself as an object of calculation and an instrument for its own ends, it becomes possible, at least in certain conditions, for power to decide to sacrifice one part of the population to benefit another.[16] Without undermining the importance of Foucault's reading, I don't believe it explains everything. Why did Nazism, unlike all other forms of power past and present, push this homicidal possibility to its fullest realization? Why did it, and only it, reverse the proportion between life and death in favor of the latter, to the point of planning its own self-destruction? I suggest that the category of biopolitics must be merged with that of immunization. Only immunization lays bare the lethal knot that thrusts the protection of life toward its potential negation. Furthermore, through the figure of autoimmune disease, the category of immunization identifies the threshold beyond which the protective apparatus attacks the very body that it should protect.[17] Moreover, the fact

that the sickness from which Nazism intended to defend the German people wasn't just any disease but an infectious disease illustrates that immunization is the interpretative key most apt for understanding the specificity of Nazism. What Nazism wanted to avoid at all costs was the contagion of superior beings by inferior beings. The deadly battle that was waged and disseminated by the regime's propaganda placed the originally healthy body and blood of the German nation in opposition to the invasive germs that had penetrated the nation with the intent of sapping its unity and its very life. The repertoire that the Reich's ideologues employed to portray their alleged enemies and most of all the Jews is well known: They were, at once, "bacilli," "bacteria," "viruses," "parasites," and "microbes." Andrzej Kaminski recalls that even interned Soviets were at times defined in similar terms.[18] Moreover, characterizing Jews as parasites is part of the secular history of (not exclusively) German anti-Judaism. Still, in the Nazi vocabulary, such a definition acquires a different meaning. It was as if something that had remained up to a certain point a loaded metaphor actually took on a physical shape [*corpo*]. This is the effect of the total biologization of the lexicon I referred to above: Jews do not *resemble* parasites, they do not behave *like* bacteria—they *are* such things. And they are treated as such. Thus the correct term for their massacre, which is anything but a sacred "holocaust," is *extermination*: something that is carried out against insects, rats, or lice. In this way, we must ascribe an entirely literal meaning to Himmler's words to the SS officers at Kharkov that "anti-Semitism is like a disinfestation. Removing lice is not an ideological question, but a question of hygiene [*pulizia*]."[19] Moreover, Hitler himself used even more precise immunological terminology: "The discovery of the Jewish virus is one of the great revolutions of this world. The battle in which we are engaged today is of the same sort as the battle waged, during the last century, by Pasteur and Koch . . . We shall regain our health only by eliminating the Jews."[20]

We ought not blur the difference between this approach, which is bacteriological, and one that is simply racial. The final solution waged against the Jews has precisely such a biological-immunitarian characterization. Even the gas used in the camps flowed through shower pipes that were used for disinfection; but disinfecting Jews was impossible, because they were the bacteria from which one needed to rid oneself. The identification between man and pathogens reached such a point that the Warsaw ghetto was intentionally built on an already contaminated site. In this way, like a

self-fulfilling prophecy, Jews fell victim to the same sickness that had justified their ghettoization: Finally, they had *really* become infected and thus agents of infection.[21] Doctors therefore had good reason to exterminate them. Naturally, this representation was in patent contrast with the Mendelian theory of the genetic, and therefore not contagious, character of racial determination. For precisely this reason, the only way to stop the impossible contagion seemed to be to eliminate all of its possible carriers, and not only them but also all Germans who may have already been contaminated, as well as all those who may have eventually been so in the future, and, once the war was lost and the Russians were a few kilometers from Hitler's bunker, quite simply *everyone*. Here the immunitary paradigm of Nazi biopolitics reaches the height of its auto-genocidal fury. As in the most devastating autoimmune disease, the defensive potential of the immune system turns against itself. The only possible outcome is generalized destruction.

What about us? The sixty years that separate us from the end of those tragic events form a barrier that nevertheless appears difficult to overcome. It's truly difficult to imagine that it could happen again, at least in the ever-larger space that we still call the West. We wouldn't be theorists of immunization if we thought that the twelve-year Nazi experience failed to produce sufficient antibodies to protect us from its return. Still, such common sense rationalizations aren't able to bring to a close a discourse that, as we've said, remains with us. I'd even add that not only is the problem, or the terrifying laceration, opened by Nazism anything but definitively healed but, in a certain way, it seems to come closer to our condition the more our condition exceeds the confines of modernity. We might best measure the enduring relevance of Nazism's foundational presuppositions from the vantage point of the final collapse of Soviet communism. The relationship between the two is far from casual: The definitive consummation of the communist philosophy of history that favored the reemergence of the question of life was, after all, at the heart of Nazi semantics. Furthermore, never as today has *bíos*, if not *zoé*, been the point of intersection for all political, social, economic, and technological practices. This is why, once the conceptual lexicon (if not the political exigency) of communism was worn out, we turned to reckon with that of Nazism, only to find it stamped across our foreheads. Whoever deluded him- or herself at the end of the war, or even in the postwar era, into thinking it was possible to reactivate the old categories of the democracies who emerged as the official winners of the battle got it all

wrong. It's utopian to argue that the complexity of the globalized world, with its sharp imbalances in wealth, power, and demographic density, can be governed with the ineffectual instruments of international law or with those left over from the traditional sovereign powers. To do so would be to fail to understand that we're approaching a threshold that's just as dramatic as the one that separated the 1920s and 1930s. Just as then, though in a different way, the soldering of politics to life makes all of the traditional theoretical and institutional categories, beginning with that of representation, irrelevant. A glance at the panorama that inaugurates the beginning of the twenty-first century is enough to give us a striking picture: from the explosion of biological terrorism to the preventative war that attempts to respond to it on its own terrain, from ethnic—that is, biological—massacres to the mass migrations that sweep away the barriers that are intended to contain them, from technologies that invest not only individual bodies but also the traits of the species to psychopharmacology that modifies our vital behaviors, from environmental politics to the explosion of new epidemics, from the reopening of concentration camps in different areas of the world to the blurring of the juridical distinction between norm and exception—all of this while everywhere a new and potentially devastating immunitary syndrome breaks out once again, uncontrollably. As we've said, none of this replicates what happened from 1933 to 1945. But nothing is entirely external to the questions of life and death that were posed then. To say that we are, now more than ever, on the reverse side of Nazism means that it isn't possible to rid ourselves of it by simply averting our gaze. To truly overturn it, to throw it back into the hell whence it came, we must consciously cross through that darkness once again and respond quite differently to the same questions that gave rise to it.