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Towards Biopolitics beyond Life and Death: The Virus, Life, and Death

Introduction

In March 2020, as the COVID-19 (hereafter "the virus" or "coronavirus") outbreak was spreading like wildfire across Europe, and massively irrupting in Italy, Giorgio Agamben issued a strong attack on the Italian Government's safety measures, its utilisation of scientific expertise in the form of safety decrees, in the process also lamenting the state of Western democracies, and Western sociopolitical values. For Agamben, the said measures affirmed the continued decay of life (understood as bios) and its transformation into zoe (mere life), thus demonstrating that survival had become the central political value in Italian and, broadly, Western politics. He asked, quite pertinently: "What will human relations become in a country that will be accustomed to living in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society with no other value other than survival?"[1] The centrality of zoe, which Agamben has spent many a decade studying,[2] is nested in the increasing normalisation of the "state of exception", whereby: "men have become so used to living in conditions of permanent crisis and emergency that they don't seem to notice that their lives have been reduced to a purely biological condition, one that has lost not only any social and political dimension, but even any compassionate and emotional one."[3]

Agamben points us, consistent with his life's work, to thinking about contemporary society, where "social distancing" and a "state of emergency" have become central to "normal" politics. That is, he points to a "deeper ethical, social, and

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[1] Giorgio Agamben, "Clarifications", in "Coronavirus and Philosophers", *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/, accessed 5 January 2021.

[2] See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005. and Giorgio Agamben, *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998.

[3] Agamben, "Clarifications".

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metaphysical erosion"[4] that has captured the West in the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries. The manifestation of this erosion for Agamben is a further entrenchment of thanatopolitical praxis in politics. Namely, in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic: "The dead – our dead – have no right to a funeral and it's not clear what happens to the corpses of our loved ones."[5] For Agamben, this erosion is found in zoe, or survival, taking the centre stage of politics, where the ethos of kinship and relations is supplanted by an ethos of self-preservation. In that sense, the 2020 pandemic has enabled the full normalisation of the politics of the "state of exception". And yet, despite Agamben's fears, the "state of exception" has allowed for a "normal", if circumstantially diminished, functioning of our societies, economies, and politics. We ask how can something that leads to a "metaphysical erosion" of ethics, values, and society allow for the maintenance and functioning thereof?

One way to understand the contemporary centrality of the measures and the virus is to think of them in Agambenian terms. Namely, to think of them as something abnormal that has been normalised. The paradox which we mentioned above would thereby be displaced, and the political task of our age would be to counter the changes. This position has many merits because it seeks to slow down the, somewhat forced, change in our societies in the face of the pandemic. From the digitalisation of higher education (e.g., over-reliance on distance e-learning), to permits issued by local authorities to travel locally, we ought to critically analyse the changes happening around us. To refer to Naomi Klein's work, we must not allow the crisis to be abused for the implementation of sweeping and unchecked sociopolitical changes, whose aim would be to centralise power in the government and reduce vertical and horizontal responsibility therein.[6] This perspective holds that the "state of exception" is a historically emerging form of governance that is being actualised as a standard sociopolitical praxis in the face of the virus, often according to the logic of "shock" or "crisis" management, thus recalibrating the traditional ethos of sociability, community, and compas-

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[4]   Christopher Caldwell, "Opinion: Meet the Philosopher Who Is Trying to Explain the Pandemic", *The New York Times*, 21 August 2020, Opinion Section, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/21/opinion/sunday/giorgio-agamben-philosophy-coronavirus.html, accessed 4 January 2021.

[5]   Agamben, "Clarifications".

[6]   Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, London, Penguin Books, 2008.

sion into an ethos of the self-preservation, atomisation, and centralisation of governmental power via decrees on the state of exception (thus affirming state sovereignty over "making live and letting die").

However, does not this view, despite its many merits, rest on a misconception of life? More precisely, this view makes it seem as if the government of pure (human) life (zoe) applies equally to everything. In turn, it makes it seem like the state of exception is unilaterally imposed by political elites, without any grounding in circumstance. Furthermore, this position takes for granted the human role in governance. The conception of power here is eminently the one of human sociability with the metaphysics of bios and zoe kept as the main ground, to the point of ignoring the agential potential of non-human forces (such as viruses) in a global society. We contend that such a perspective is insufficient to grasp what our societies are facing and whether that "what" is governable in the first place.

The other way to think the current "crisis", and one which we posit, is less as a destruction and replacement of the "normal" way (or a metaphysical erosion of the values) of life, but more as its rupture and change in the face of the events that "normal" life has brought about (e.g., via processes such as climate change, deforestation, and poaching). This perspective does not legitimise or leave in abeyance the abuse of power by political elites behind the veil of expertise but is rather an acknowledgment that the "normal" that humans thought of as "theirs"[7] is suddenly inhabited, overpopulated, and over-stretched by some other beings, such as the virus. In that sense, the foregoing paradox is not displaced but is at the core of the problematisation of biopolitical thinking. The crux of the concern, therefore, is to think of the erosion of values and the normal

[7]   Primarily, the point would be to interrogate the universality of the "human" (see Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2018), bearing in mind the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on minorities across the world, which has been well documented (see Mrigesh Bhatia. "COVID-19 and BAME Group in the United Kingdom" *The International Journal of Community and Social Development* 2 (2/2020); El-Khatib et. al, "The Disproportionate Effect of COVID-19 Mortality on Ethnic Minorities: Genetics or Health Inequalities?" *EClinicalMedicine*, 23 (2020), p. 100430; Rajeev Syal, "Structural Racism Led to Worse Covid Impact on BAME Groups – Report", *The Guardian*, 27 October 2020, *World News Section*). For an excellent overview of the pandemic's disproportionate impact on minorities, see PEH's 2020 report (Public Health England, *Disparities in the Risk and Outcomes of COVID-19*, London, Crown Copyright, 2020, p. 92).

functioning of society beyond traditional theorisations and with the praxis of "thinking without a banister".[8] That is, the task would be to rethink those values and a sense of normality in the face of the virus.

Beyond Biopolitics: the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is the time of the anthropos (human). This concept serves to denote a specific geological time during which human activity acquired a geological character.[9] Put simply, the Anthropocene is a moment in which humans' social, economic, and political activities have acquired a telluric, or geological, significance. This means that humans are changing and manipulating nature's processes to the point where those processes are no longer understood as strictly natural (i.e., non-human). However, the Anthropocene is not an entirely new category. Human-induced environmental changes have been present ever since humans properly started cultivating land, domesticating animals, and changing the environment around them. In that sense, the Anthropocene is not "new" in that it started during the Great Acceleration (the period after WWII) or after the outset of the Industrial Revolution (broadly from the late 18th to late 19th centuries), where most literature places it.[10] The novelty of the Anthropocene is that since the outset of the Industrial Revolution and especially since the start of the Great Acceleration, the human-induced impact on the environment has reached previously unseen levels and has generated unprecedented geological and environmental changes (that is, in both known human history and known geological history). For example, human "activity has transformed between a third and a half of the land surface of the planet."[11] Additionally, the diversity of plant and animal life has been greatly reduced as a direct result of human activities, where "the number of wild animals on Earth has halved in the last forty years. Creatures across land, rivers, and the seas are being decimated as humans kill them

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[8] Hannah Arendt and Jerome Kohn, *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953–1975*, New York, Schocken Books, 2018, p. 497.

[9] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2/2009), p. 209.

[10] See Stanley C. Finney and Lucy E. Edwards, "The 'Anthropocene' Epoch: Scientific Decision or Political Statement?", *GSA Today*, 26 (3/2016) and Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne (eds.), *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis*, London and New York, Routledge, 2015, pp. 1–10.

[11] See: *ibid*.

for food in unsustainable numbers, while polluting, fragmenting, and destroying their habitats."[12] Zoonotic globalisation, where various bacteria and viruses are easily transferred across the globalised world from "nature" to "human", is one of the features of this great event, the Anthropocene.

With regard to COVID-19, the most recent agent of zoonotic globalisation, researchers, at the time of the writing of this article, do not yet know if the virus originated from wild meat consumption (e.g., bats) or if it "escaped" from a research facility.[13] The Anthropocene is often a point of seeing the effects (e.g. in the form of a pandemic) of human exploitation of the environment, but is also often a point of not knowing where those effects come from and how to deal with them. One of the reasons for the confusion regarding the origin of COVID-19 is that Wuhan, China, where the first cases were recorded, is in central China and outbreaks of coronaviruses (that is, instances of when a virus "jumps" from an animal to a human) are more frequent in subtropical Chinese provinces.[14] Thus, the conclusion is often advanced that human intervention in, or exploitation of, the environment is the most probable cause of the current pandemic. In that sense, what does the inability to identify the origins of the virus and the potential role of the human exploitation of natural resources in causing the pandemic tell us about governing in the Anthropocene?

Much like Agamben asking what the loss of an emotional dimension of our lives would be like with the "new normal", Arundhati Roy's poignant essay on the pandemic in *Azadi* (2020) points us to some new concerns and worries:

> Who can use the term 'gone viral' now without shuddering a little? Who can look at anything anymore – a door handle, a cardboard carton, a bag of vegetables – without imagining it swarming with those unseeable, undead, unliving blobs dotted with suction pads waiting to fasten themselves on to our lungs? [...] Who among us is not a quack epidemiologist, virologist, statistician, and prophet? [...] And even while the virus proliferates, who could not be thrilled by the swell of

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[12] Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Cosmologies of the Anthropocene: Panpsychism, Animism, and the Limits of Posthumanism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, p. 4.

[13] Jane Qiu, "How China's Bat Woman Hunted Down Viruses from SARS to the New Coronavirus", *Scientific American*, 1 June 2020. https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0620-24, accessed 4 January 2021.

[14] Qiu, "How China's Bat Woman".

birdsong in cities, peacocks dancing at traffic crossings, and the silence in the skies?[15]

Roy's text points us to a present, and a future, of an intensification of worry, and an intensification of the instinct of self-preservation or survival across the world. However, this discourse does not base its analysis on the looming threat of the state of exception. If anything, Roy criticises the Indian government for racism in implementing its measures, and for the poor quality of the measures implemented. Rather, the analysis is focused on uncertainty, that is, an acquired state of being uncertain, of not knowing what will transpire, and its interpolation into the political. In that sense, Roy helps us think how everyday actions, such as social interaction, are becoming unsettling precisely because they are now what is at stake for survival. While Agamben's worry is that this is happening due to the centralisation of power in the state, concomitant with the erosion of the values of sociability, and through the imposition of the emergency measures, for Roy this is happening due to the fact that life, other life, forces humans to accept an altered normality. In the same vein, Slavoj Žižek, in his response to Agamben, writes about creating, with great difficulty, a new normality[16] because we will: "have to change our entire stance to life, to our existence as living beings *among other forms of life*."[17] (Italics added.)

The virus, the "unseeable, undead, unliving blobs," are merely one of myriad existing beings that are slowly, but surely, demonstrating to us that our "old normal" politics, performed against a backdrop of nature, i.e., the life and nonlife (bios and geos, respectively), was merely an illusion. Today, we see that this division of bios and geos, so present in dominant forms of theorising the governance of life (biopolitics) and death (thanatopolitics), is being displaced by an appearance of non-human forces, many of which stand in between life and nonlife, conventionally understood. That is, the tenets of biopolitics and than-

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15   Arundhati Roy, *Azadi: Freedom, Fascism, Fiction*, Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2020, p. 135.

16   Aleksander Adamski, "I Respectfully Disagree with Agamben' (Slavoj Žižek on COVID-19)", *Contemporary Humanism*, 14 September 2020, https://www.contemporaryhumanism.net/i-respectfully-disagree-with-agamben-slavoj-zizek-on-covid-19-aleksander-adamski/; see also Nataša Štefe, "Slavoj Žižek: Z muko bomo morali zgraditi drugačno normalnost." Val 202, https://val202.rtvslo.si/2020/03/slavojzizek/, accessed: 4 January 2021.

17   Slavoj Zizek, *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*, New York and London, OR Books, 2020, p. 70.

atopolitics are not somehow transcended or made obsolete. Rather, there is a call for a recalibration of the ontological grounding of these tenets in the face of the radical changes of the Anthropocene.

Consequently, biopolitics, as restricted to sociopolitical relations,[18] needs to be rethought in the 21st century through the lenses of planetary and ecological entanglements. Biopolitics, emerging in the 18th century as a mode of governance of human life and of the resources and bodies needed for the capitalist mode of production,[19] centred human life and human ways of being as the focus of biopower (i.e., the organisation of life). However, considering the global situation in which climate change reshapes everyday practices, social relations, and political institutions, the traditional conceptualisation of biopolitics as the sovereign power of making live and letting die is being challenged. In that sense, biopolitics can no longer be limited to human life as opposed to non-human (non-)life, but processes of life and death in general. That is, the governability of life as a sociopolitical paradigm is embedded in larger entanglements of planetary, biological, and geological processes, where the political ethos of the "extended normal" consists in affirming the fact that we are intertwined with the foregoing processes and "at stake to and with" them.[20]

Just as we depend on bacteria for our digestion, and the plants that produce the oxygen we need to survive, human beings also rely on the soil that we live on. We are bound to collaborate to enable life for each other, as subjects related and connected to "multiple others".[21] The virus has demonstrated this to us in a far more visceral way, nearly shutting the global economy down, but at the same time opening for us a window to a world that could be. As Roy writes, "while the virus proliferates"[22] it opens some new perspectives on and visions of the active world, which are usually suppressed by the dominant humano-centric socioec-

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[18] Maurizio Lazzarato, "From Biopower to Biopolitics", *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 13 (2002), pp. 112–25.

[19] *Ibid*., see also Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995.

[20] Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 55.

[21] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, UK and Malden, Polity Press, 2013, p. 167.

[22] Arundhati Roy, *Azadi,* p. 135.

onomic and political activity. How can we think this opening to the world? What challenges does it present?

(Un)governability

Biopolitics, or governance of life, has become one of the most enduring paradigms of contemporary political thought. And beyond that, governance is the central matter of concern for most political theorists today. How do we govern in the Anthropocene? Who governs? Indeed, questions abound. In that sense, some argue that we live in an era of "risk,"[23] where the governance of effects, or risk management, is the dominant way of addressing contemporary crises, especially climate change.[24] The proliferation of risk has ushered in an era of "resilience,"[25] where resilience is understood as a form of governing the complexity of the challenges affecting the world.[26] Thus, in the new "risk" modernity, it is no longer desirable to focus on the causes of problems, but rather to seek to manage the effects thereof.[27] Some have rightly lamented that the paradigm of the governance of effects, when faced with the global challenges of climate change, is in trouble because it forces policymakers to simultaneously want to manipulate the environment to mitigate climate change, while concurrently realising that the environment is "out of reach."[28] However, most of the mentioned literature rests on the inherited assumption of "human" life

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[23] Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London and Newbury Park, Sage Publications, 1992.

[24] Olaf Corry, "Securitisation and 'Riskification': Second-Order Security and the Politics of Climate Change", *Millennium* 40 (2/2012), pp. 235–258.

[25] David Chandler and Jon Coaffee (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of International Resilience,* London and New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, see also Myriam Dunn Cavelty, Mareile Kaufmann, and Kristian Søby Kristensen, "Resilience and (in)security: Practices, subjects, temporalities", *Security Dialogue* 46 (1/2015), pp. 3–14, as well as Claudia Aradau and Rens Van Munster, "Governing Terrorism Through Risk: Taking Precautions, (un)Knowing the Future," *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (1/2007), pp. 89–115.

[26] David Chandler, "Beyond Neoliberalism: Resilience, the New Art of Governing Complexity", *Resilience* 2, no. 1 (2 January 2014), pp. 47–63.

[27] David Chandler, "A World without Causation: Big Data and the Coming of Age of Posthumanism," *Millennium,* 43 (3/2015), pp. 833–851.

[28] Pol Bargués-Pedreny and Jessica Schmidt, "Learning to Be Postmodern in an All Too Modern World: 'Whatever Action' in International Climate Change Imaginaries", *Global Society*, 33 (1/2019), p. 1.

being the model for all life and, more importantly, on the assumption that any life or non-life can be governed. Because of that, and given the virus and all the problems with managing the fallout of the pandemic, is it not pertinent to think of the challenge of ungovernability as a rupture in the established modes of understanding governance?

In terms of effects, human entanglements with planetary, bio-ecological, and physical processes are so great that we as a species are not able to fully grasp them. In terms of the causes of relations and events, sometimes it is impossible to even distinguish between human and non-human causes. This overlap between unmanageable effects and unknowable causes is broadly what we consider the ungovernable. Following Ghassan Hage, we treat the ungovernable thusly:

> That is, the ungovernable is something we have originally classified [...] as 'not governed-yet' – which also implies that we consider it as 'ought to be governed' – but find ourselves, and one must insist on this point, find ourselves repeatedly unable to govern. It is because of this repetitive nature of the encounter that we start classifying something as ungovernable. Thus, we can say that the ungovernable denotes a certain history. Individuals, groups, animals, plants, things or social processes cannot be deemed by governmental assemblage as "ungovernable" on the basis of a single encounter. This makes the 'ungovernable as a classification and an experience paradoxical in that it indicates on one hand an inability of governmental force to relate to it and yet it also implies a historically acquired familiarity: it denotes a relation paradoxically marked by a certain intimate lack of relationality, a relating to something through a recognition of permanent inability to relate to it.[29]

What Hage so aptly points to is the experience of being familiar with something that should be governed, but cannot be, despite its historical familiarity to a given governmental regime. This inability to govern can be caused by many factors. For example, our relationship to various illnesses is one of acquired historical familiarity, but it is at the same time an inability, or lack of desire, to form such relationships. Ungovernability is thus the inability to understand how and where the outbreak of an illness, such as COVID-19, originates, and illustrates difficulties in dealing with the consequences of the outbreak. The virus operates

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Ghassan Hage, *Is Racism an Environmental Threat?*, Malden, MA, Polity, 2017, p. 80.

as an ungovernable non-human actor because it forces the established political and economic order to change its basic parameters in order to protect human life: increasing the prevalence of online communication, economic fallout, the suspension of physical public life, and an extreme decrease in air pollutants – something that no climate conference has succeeded in accomplishing thus far. The virus reveals how the ungovernable reacts upon governability. The ungovernable entity forces the political order of governability to redirect its course precisely because relating to it is problematic and undesirable.

Ungovernability is the point where the traditional axis of the division of life and non-life meets. This is where the boundaries of governability are temporarily and provisionally set because governability never ceases trying to categorise, analyse, and subject the ungovernable entity to its order, despite its failures. In that vein, "ungovernability" is one of the features of the Anthropocene. This primarily refers to the fact that as geologic agents in a globalised world, humans have set into motion processes that reverberate in the world, and which they often cannot account for. That is: "there is a question [in the Anthropocene] about our capacity to make decisions regarding events that are beyond the human experience. That's probably one of the first requirements of the new geological epoch."[30]

In that sense, and as Nils Bubandt convincingly argues, there are "gray zones" in understanding governance, whereby cause and effect mechanisms are displaced due to their undetectability and uncertainty. He uses the example of a mud "volcano" that erupted in 2006 near an oil drill in Surabaya, Indonesia, to point to "the increasing impossibility of distinguishing human from non-human forces, the anthropos from the geos."[31] (Italics in original.) The impossibility of distinguishing between different forces relates to the causes of the eruption of the volcano, which displaced close to 40,000 people and caused USD 2.2 billion in damage.[32] Bubandt asks if the eruption was caused by seismic activity (like

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[30]   Clive Hamilton, Christophe Bonneuil, and François Gemenne, *The Anthropocene and the Global Environmental Crisis,* p. 11.

[31]   Nils Bubandt, "Haunted Geologies, Spirits, Stones, and the Necropolitics of the Anthropocene", in Tsing et al. (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts of the Anthropocene*, Minneapolis and London, The University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p. 122.

[32]   Bubandt, "Haunted Geologies", p. 121.

an earthquake) or human activity, such as oil drilling.[33] He posits that in the mentioned case it was impossible to establish what or who caused the eruption, thus pointing to a new regime of extinction, catastrophe and geological change in the Anthropocene, which he calls "necropolitics" (see below).

Bubandt argues that the impossibility of finding an answer is a demonstration that we live in an era of necropolitics, where necropolitics is not understood as defined by the term's originator, Achilles Mbembe, whereby it is: "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations."[34] Rather, Bubandt's necropolitics is explained thusly:

> But in a time of global warming, ocean acidification, and mass extinction, I suggest necropolitics has come to cover a much broader and much more stochastic politics of life and death. Humans, animals, plants, fungi, and bacteria now live and die under conditions that may have been critically shaped by human activity but that are also increasingly outside of human control. I use the notion of a necropolitics of the Anthropocene to indicate the life-and-death effects—intended as well as unintended—of this kind of ruination and extinction. Nature may increasingly be human-made, but humans have not only lost control of this nature making and unmaking; we have increasingly lost the ability to tell the difference between our own world and the natural worlds we make and destroy. As each new scientific discovery reveals more details of the complex interplay between human worlds and natural worlds, we are also increasingly faced with our inability to tell these worlds apart. In the Anthropocene, necropolitics operates under the sign of metaphysical indeterminacy rather than certainty, unintended consequences rather than control.[35] (Italics added.)

What Bubandt posits with necropolitics has everything to do with the politics of not knowing the cause, even if that cause is human, and not being able to "govern" the effect. In that sense, not knowing the cause returns us to the position of ungovernability, which does not imply only that something is unmanageable, but also unknowable. Ungovernability then challenges the solutionist and

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[33] *Ibid*., p. 122.

[34] Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. S. Corcoran, Durham, Duke University Press, 2019, p. 68.

[35] Nils Bubandt, "Haunted Geologies", pp. 124–125.

managerial paradigms so well-entrenched in contemporary political theorising. It challenges them not because it presents humans as incapable of "governing" per se, but rather because it forces us to recalibrate the ontological roots upon which paradigms of governance in the Anthropocene rest (e.g., the nature-culture dualism). Put simply, one cannot simply distinguish between the human and non-human forces at play. This fact is a challenge for political theory.

The humano-centrism of biopolitical governance is slowly becoming unsettled in political theory and practice. Since there are limits to governance that correspond roughly to the limits of being human and what the human, understood in the broadest sense, can govern, human political activities are constrained, reshaped, and moulded by other forces, agencies, and modes of being.[36] Thus, the human condition and politics need to be considered in the broader framework of being entangled with the ungovernable. It is important to focus more on the idea of the ungovernable as it pertains to the distinctions between life and death. Why? Because the distinctions between life and death, and the centralisation of human life as the primary concern of the analysis of power, is something that sustains traditionalist conceptions of biopolitics and thanatopolitics. In that sense, thinking about that distinction through the prism of the virus, an entity which traverses the boundary between life and death, helps us grasp further the importance of reorienting our thoughts towards relational approaches of thinking politics and governance.

The Virus and the (Un)governability of Life and Death

Viruses have generally been considered to be entities that operate on the border of life and death. This is so due to their specific structure, which "lacks essential systems necessary for metabolic functions."[37] The University of Queensland Australia's Institute for Molecular Bioscience (IMB) defines viruses thusly: "Viruses are an assembly of different types of molecules that consist of genetic ma-

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36 Simon Dalby, "Biopolitics and Climate Security in the Anthropocene", *Geoforum*, 49 (2013) pp. 184–192; Christy Tidwell, "Monstrous Natures Within: Posthuman and New Materialist Ecohorror in Mira Grant's 'Parasite'", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21 (3/2014), pp. 538–549; William E. Connolly, "The 'New Materialism' and the Fragility of Things", *Millennium*, 41 (3/2013), pp. 399–412.

37 Luis P. Villarreal, "Are Viruses Alive?", *Scientific American*, 8 August 2008, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/are-viruses-alive-2004/, accessed 5 January 2021.

terial (either a single- or double-stranded DNA or RNA) with a protein coat and sometimes a layer of fat too (an envelope)."[38] That is, viruses are an assemblage of molecules that cannot survive on their own and reproduce on their own (the IMB states that hence "they aren't considered 'living'"[39]). However, what viruses can do is survive on surfaces for varying amount of time until being picked up by a host. Put simply, viruses need a host to survive. They are predators who, upon entering a host, replicate by entering living cells and reprogramming them to produce viral cells. Viruses are paradoxical beings that constantly mediate the interstices of the borders between life and death. In that sense, viruses are a palatable trope for an age in which borderline entities help challenge the strict division between nature and culture, and the strict division between life (bios) and nonlife (geos). For Elizabeth Povinelli, the "Virus" is one of the three central figures of "geontopower" (see below), with the other two being the "Animist" and the "Desert".[40] For our purposes, we focus on the Virus.

According to Povinelli:

> The virus is the figure for that which seeks to disrupt the current arrangements of Life and Nonlife by claiming that it is a difference that makes no difference not because all is alive, vital, and potent, nor because all is inert, replicative, unmoving, inert, dormant, and endurant. Because the division of Life and Nonlife does not define or contain the Virus, it can use and ignore this division for the sole purpose of diverting the energies of arrangements of existence in order to extend itself. The Virus copies, duplicates, and lies dormant even as it continually adjusts to, experiments with, and tests its circumstances. It confuses and levels the difference between Life and Nonlife while carefully taking advantage of the minutest aspects of their differentiation.[41]

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[38] "What's the Difference between Bacteria and Viruses?", *Institute for Molecular Bioscience* 20 April 2020, https://imb.uq.edu.au/article/2020/04/difference-between-bacteria-and-viruses, accessed 3 January 2021.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism,* Durham, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 4.

[41] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Mathew Coleman, and Kathryn Yusoff, "An Interview with Elizabeth Povinelli: Geontopower, Biopolitics and the Anthropocene", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34 (2–3/2017), pp. 18–19.

The Virus, as a liminal entity, operates across zones of life and nonlife. It exploits and confuses at the same time every slightest differentiation between life and nonlife in order to extend itself.[42] It moves from one entity to another to reproduce itself, leaves dead, inert organisms behind, and does not give anything in return. The Virus is a parasite and parasites instrumentalise the living functions of other species for their reproduction: "Parasites do not make value judgements about their hosts or take sides in the human conflicts they get involved in; they show up because an opportunity is an opportunity."[43]

More importantly, however, the Virus operates as a new figure of "geontopower". While for Foucault the historical regimes of the governance of life (biopower) were represented by four metaphorical figures: the Malthusian couple, the masturbating child, the hysterical woman, and the perverse adult,[44] for Povinelli the new figures (the Animist, the Virus, and the Desert) represent a new kind of plane of power's manifestation. The ontological roots of bios and geos, on which biopolitical governance rests, as mentioned earlier in this paper, are represented by the three foregoing figures. With that in mind, the Virus, as one of the figures, challenges the roots of the division between life and death, and the governance of this division. For Povinelli, this division is "geontopower" and its mode of governance is geontology, the power that divides between life and death and a governance regime that decides what gets to be valued as life, and what is disavowed as death. However, geontopower is not something that emerged recently because of climate change. According to Povinelli, geontopower has always been there, it was rather sidelined by the dominant discourses on governance. Therefore:

> But geontopower is not a new power – a power only now emerging to replace biopolitics. Biopower (the governance through life and death) has long depended on a subtending geontopower (the difference between the active and the inert). In other words, geontopower does not come after or alongside the new geological and meteorological age of the human – Anthropocene and climate change – nor is it a new stage of late liberalism. The Anthropocene and climate change have

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[42] Povinelli, *Geontologies*, p. 19.

[43] Rosemary Drisdelle, *Parasites: Tales of Humanity's Most Unwelcome Guests*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010, p. 15.

[44] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley, Westminster, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012, p. 105.

certainly made geontopower visible to people who were previously unaffected by it – who shunted its deleterious effects elsewhere.[45]

In Povinelli's sense, the key to understanding and analysing geontopower would be to historicise and politicise its characteristics, especially during the Anthropocene, the time when its visibility has become hard to deny. The Virus, then, as one of the figures of geontology, allows for a more incisive analytical focus and a representation of how the organisation of life and death in late modernity operates. With that in mind, Povinelli writes:

> A similar approach can be taken in relationship to the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus. Each of these figures provides a mechanism through which we can conceive of the once presupposed but now trembling architectures of geontological governance. Again, these figures and discourses are not the exit from or the answer to biopolitics. They are not subjugated subjects waiting to be liberated. Geontology is not a crisis of life (bios) and death (thanatos) at a species level (extinction), or merely a crisis between Life (bios) and Nonlife (geos, meteoros). Geontopower is a mode of late liberal governance. And it is this mode of governance that is trembling.[46]

The Virus is an ungovernable entity that upsets the governance based on the clear differentiation between life and non-life. It wavers on the ever-changing verge between life and nonlife. As such, the Virus has no firm, given place in the world, no sense of belonging or attachment, and this renders it vulnerable to expulsion: "But while the Virus may seem to be the radical exit from geontopower at first glance, to be the Virus is to be subject to intense abjection and attacks, and to live in the vicinity of the Virus is to dwell in an existential crisis."[47] In that sense, the Virus as an ungovernable entity introduces a crisis in the existing order of governmentality because it challenges the established distinction between life and nonlife and thus exposes the dependence and vulnerability of biopower on geontopower. However, at the same time, as an ungovernable entity that poses a danger to human lives, its existence is fought against. As a

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[45]   Povinelli, Coleman and Yusoff, "An Interview with Elizabeth Povinelli", p. 173.

[46]   Povinelli, *Geontologies*, p. 16.

[47]   *Ibid.*, p. 19.

figure, then, the Virus is ultimately lonely, abject, but continually proliferating and challenging the dominant forms of organising life on the planet.

Critically thinking the COVID-19 virus as a figure of geontopower and the Anthropocene as an event that ruptures the sedimented discourse of the primacy of the anthropos and life over non-anthropos and nonlife in biopolitics and governance is important for investigating the shift in the understanding of non-human agencies in the Anthropocene. It makes us ask if it is only important to find a way to include the non-human in the dominant mode of governing. Perhaps this is the easy way out, merely adding more ways of "caring" for nature and the world to the existing paradigm of governance. In that sense, if the case is that politics is the constant struggle to include subjects that are not part of the existing political order – demos – into it, to make them heard, seen, and visible in a linguistic, legitimate, articulated way (e.g., logos), then can we simply include non-human entities into the sphere of demos even though they lack linguistic reasoning (i.e., they make noise)?[48]

With that, we would seemingly be committing the inclusion or, better said, transformation of noise (viruses, rocks, insects) into language.[49] But how would that help us address our political issues in a substantive way? The mere inclusion of the non-human into the human sphere of politics is a liberal gesture.[50] One simply recognises an entity as legitimate within the existing political order and continues with the established practices and processes; business as usual thrives. The paradox of that position is even more ironic because the processes of the Anthropocene are already underway, and it is impossible not to consider the ramifications thereof in politics. What is needed is a radical transformation of our existing categories and processes of the political and politics. The posthuman condition in which subjects are not linear, fixed, and unitary but always situated and entangled with multiple others, other "companion species,"[51] is a

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[48] For the distinction between logos and noise, see Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. S. Corcoran, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

[49] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "The Rhetorics of Recognition in Geontopower", *Philosophy & Rhetoric,* 48 (4/2015), p. 432.

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 432–433.

[51] Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology", *Theory, Culture & Society,* 23 (7–8/2006), pp. 197–208; Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble", and

cornerstone of the new way of understanding the political, where it is all that is enmeshed with the organisation of the entanglements of life and non-life.

In that sense, the paradigm of ungovernability, or thinking the ungovernable, is one of the processes of opening up to different ways of thinking, which go beyond the traditional concepts of biopolitics as the governance of life. Here, Agamben's concerns are not dispelled as anachronous or irrelevant, but are rather upscaled and recalibrated to include other processes that destabilise notions of the human control of the planetary. Perhaps, given the current conditions, the "state of exception" created during the pandemic is a necessity, and a form of human solidarity, in the face of the different consequences of the human role as geologic agents, but it surely is not a static ahistorical condition. Its history is bigger than just the history of the survival of (the human) zoe taking centre stage in politics. Rather, its history is one of entanglements, i.e., the material, planetary, human, non-human, capitalist, and geophysical entanglements that are visible today more than ever before, and whose presence we need to see through different lenses.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate some claims made in the face of the pandemic that rest on the dominant, or traditional, ways of theorising bios and geos, as well as the contemporary organisation of life (biopolitics) and death (thanatopolitics). We focused on an article of Giorgio Agamben and addressed his critically potent remarks on the way the Italian Government handled the pandemic due to their impact on the debate over the strong lockdown measures in the early period of the pandemic (February to April 2020) and the importance of Agamben in biopolitical thought. We argued that COVID-19 is a different kind of threat, to which the classical biopolitical and thanatopolitical logics of analysis do not apply. In the Anthropocene, the age of humanity's apotheosis as a geological actor, there is confusion as to how we can understand the causes and effects of both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric actions and govern them. What is to be done? Which way to go? We argue that this situation forces us to think anew and "without a banister".

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Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

The COVID-19 outbreak is an example of zoonotic globalisation, a feature of the Anthropocene, where the deeper human global interconnection enabled the quicker spread of the virus, carried over into the wider world again due to human action (either through wet markets or labs studying coronaviruses). However, that same action was not *just human*; we cannot deny the role of the virus in the pandemic, nor can we deny that the way it spread depended on a particular human relationship to nature. The fact that humans cannot consider themselves the only actors in the wide system of Gaia in the Anthropocene and the fact that humans cannot reckon with the consequences of their actions, presents a challenge for political theory, in which theory must reckon with the ungovernable.

The ungovernable, as we argued, is a somewhat paradoxical situation of being familiar with historical challenges, such as pandemics, but not being able to govern them. In that sense, the challenge behooves a rethinking of the foundations of the present theoretical efforts. Pandemics such as COVID-19 open the doors to thinking viruses, and other beings, as agents of this seemingly new age. Mediating the border between life and death, the ungovernable virus has exposed the roots of the problem of biopolitics: the organisation of life and death, which it takes for granted (i.e., geontology).

Finally, we argue, it is time to take biopolitics further and to think the deeper planetary entanglements of different humans and different non-humans. In that sense, COVID-19 and the lockdown measures would not be thought simply through the prism of the state of exception or the survival of bare life (zoe), but through the prism of the causes and consequences of human beings as geological agents, and how these causes and consequences alter the sociopolitical paradigms and understandings of the world. Furthermore, complexifying the picture by confronting the Anthropocene does not aim at obfuscating answers, but rather at demonstrating that the questions and answers humans have traditionally asked and posed have depended on the now decaying ontological roots of nature vs. culture and life vs. death. The level of analysis has moved to a new plane, one that takes a broader image of relations as being central. The aim of this article, however, was not to exactly demonstrate the "how" of this predicament, but mainly to diagnose it and set it up as a problem.

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