The Shadows of Atheology
Epidemics, Power and Life after Foucault

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Abstract
This essay examines a hidden link in biopolitical thinking after Foucault – the relation between biology and theology. The result is a turn away from the dichotomy of life/death and towards a life-after-life, an afterlife that is vitalist, networked and immanent. The model for this, however, is not in postmodernity but in the pre-modernity of medicine, plague and demonology.

Key words
biopolitics ■ Foucault ■ demonology

. . . it is really quite ridiculous to measure natural things against supernatural things, and the actions of animals against the actions of spirits and demons. (Jean Bodin, De la Démonomanie des sorciers, 1580)

The Necromancy of Bare Life

What follows is a series of sections – more meditations, really – that ask the simple question: what is the ‘bio’ in biopolitics? Biopolitics sometimes takes the ‘bio’ to mean biological or medicalized life, and indeed a number of Michel Foucault’s books and lectures bear out this definition. But Foucault’s interests lay primarily in the transformations in power, and as such the ‘bio’ may have more to do with law (whether juridical or, in Giorgio Agamben’s sense, exceptional) or political economy (as witnessed in Foucault’s Collège de France lectures). The ‘bio’ can also be taken in a philosophical and rhetorical sense, as Roberto Esposito does in his play on the terms ‘immunity’ and ‘community’. Finally, there is also a notion of biopolitics that stresses the ‘bio’ as a temporal phenomenon, not just as ‘life’ but as living labor, as a general intellect (despite their differences, Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno and Maurizio...
Lazzarato can be grouped here). In these examples – the ‘bio’ as medicine, law or labor – something called ‘life’ is defined in terms of something other than life. And biopolitics is perhaps the inevitable differential that results between the two poles of a romanticized notion of ‘life itself’ and a more cynical notion of that through which life is defined and constructed. But the ‘bio’ of biopolitics remains this always-receding horizon – and this is a challenge for biopolitics itself.

Foucault, as we know, discussed this ‘bio’ aspect in a number of ways – in anatomo-politics it is the life of the individual docile body, rendered amenable to various disciplines; in biopolitics it is the life of population, understood as simultaneously the biological species and a national and political-economic entity. Yet, Foucault’s examples always point to this receding conceptual horizon, one in which the life of the body or the population itself appears as a non-entity that is nevertheless manifest in a pervasive way. In a sense, then, the true object of biopolitics is not simply this or that form-of-life, but a notion of life itself that runs through the disciplined body and the secured population. This is most evident in Foucault’s comments on epidemics, the one form of life that is defined by its capacity for coursing through bodies and populations.

The claim made in the meditations that follow is that the ‘bio’ of biopolitics has to be understood not just in terms of the individual body or the population, but as a governance of ‘life itself’ – and a notion of life itself that is principally characterized by circulation, flux and flow. This is, to be sure, life understood as zoē and bios, as animal life and the qualified life of the human, but it is also life understood as what Aristotle called psukhē – a principle of life, a vital principle, a life-essence, the life of the living. While human agency both individual and collective is imbricated in this notion of life as psukhē, the primary challenge to biopolitical modes of power is this: how to acknowledge the fundamentally unhuman qualities of life as circulation, flux and flow, while also providing the conditions for its being governed and managed. Biopolitics in this sense becomes the governance of vital forces, and biopolitics thus confronts what is essentially a question of scale – how to manage and modulate phenomena that are at once ‘above’ and ‘below’ the scale of the human. Epidemics are an exemplary case of this de-scaling of the human, in which it is not simply a particular manifestation of the living (human host, microbial parasite, animal vector), but rather a whole network of vital forces that course through the human in ways that function at once at the macro-scale and micro-scale (global travel, inter-species contagion, protein–protein interactions).

Thus, we can pose this question of the ‘bio’ of biopolitics in a number of different ways. We will first consider the concept of the epidemic – both in contemporary developments in biodefense, also in the Greek concept of epi-demos. This will lead us to a consideration of Foucault’s own mapping of biopolitics vis-à-vis epidemics. From these touchstones we will derive a view of biopolitics as the attempt to govern life conceived as an anonymous, unhuman phenomenon of circulation, flux and flow. Ultimately, we will be
led to think about biopolitics in medieval and Scholastic terms— that is, in terms of a pre-modern context in which the management of life in terms of circulation and flow is a primary concern. This is the major theme of “Scholastic demonology”, whose main goal is not only to prevent pathological circulations such as demonic possession, but also to distinguish between divine and demonic circulations (e.g. divine rapture vs demonic possession). In the end, we will raise the possibility of a different kind of biopolitics, one whose paradigm is less that of epidemiology and more to be understood in terms of demonology.

Medical Thrillers

Let us begin with a modern example. In the fall of 2005 the US Department of Health and Human Services unofficially released a draft document of the ‘Pandemic Influenza Strategic Plan’, a massive 300-page document that, among other things, outlined what a future H5N1 outbreak might look like (Harris, 2005). At points, this doomsday scenario, in its extrapolation of a potential state of emergency, tends to read more like a filmscript than a public health document: reports of several cases of severe respiratory illness are reported in a small southeast Asian village; the infection spreads to other cities via air travel; the outbreak makes news headlines worldwide; health officials rush to identify and isolate the virulent agent in the lab; hospitals are overwhelmed and under-staffed; the massive demand for vaccines would not only engulf clinics, but would threaten to break out into rioting; travel restrictions and quarantines would be enforced (with military assistance); doctors discover that existing vaccines are only partially effective; and finally, ‘social unrest occurs . . . public anxiety heightens mistrust of government, diminishing compliance with public health advisories’.

The draft document is remarkable for the sense of uncertainty it conveys. Even high-tech fields such as genomics drug design are only partially effective. In the end, everything falls short of expectation: science, technology, the ability to govern effectively and the ability to exist peacefully in groups. But what is also significant is that the document presents its doomsday scenario in the form of a narrative, and in this sense it not only references contemporary genres such as the medical thriller, but a whole lineage of narratives concerning plague and pestilence— both fictional and non-fictional— that stretches back through Camus, Shelley, Defoe, Boccaccio and Thucydides. There is a bizarre sense of inevitability in this particular narrative, however, almost as if the document is not really about an epidemic or public health at all. There is even a temptation to read the draft document in eschatological terms: preparations are to be made, not for warding off or for preventing plague, but for an event that seems to be shrouded in inevitability. Are such theological intimations indirectly echoed by epidemiologists and public health officials, when they state that the question is not ‘if’ but ‘when’?

The draft ‘Pandemic Influenza Strategic Plan’ was later released publicly as the *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza* (US Homeland Security, 2006).
Security Council, 2006). Its tone, by contrast, is far less pessimistic and skeptical, and far more pro-active. It foregrounds the bullet-point approach to preparedness and response that has become a rhetorical hallmark of US security discourse:

The *National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza* guides our preparedness and response to an influenza pandemic, with the intent of (1) stopping, slowing or otherwise limiting the spread of a pandemic to the United States; (2) limiting the domestic spread of a pandemic, and mitigating disease, suffering and death; and (3) sustaining infrastructure and mitigating impact to the economy and the functioning of society. (US Homeland Security Council, 2006: 2)

Importantly, a central part of this approach involves the use of information networks to offer real-time monitoring of potential disease hot zones. These ‘disease surveillance networks’ – part of the Biosurveillance Program – draw together a range of data, from drug prescriptions to air travel patterns, to produce a truly global, network view of public health.1

Preparing-in-advance, getting-ready, ready-at-hand, watching-over, ready-to-act – this almost Heideggerian vocabulary situates the epidemic as an event, an event of infection, contagion, transmission, communication, vaccination . . . Everything is centered around a certain relation to time, to the temporality of circulation and flows, and in particular the temporality of prediction and predictability, forecasting and foresight – in short, an ‘epidemic time’ that will, in a sense, have already passed. If the earlier draft document gave one a shaky sense of confidence in public health security, the later version imparts a distinct tone of reassurance.

But the time of an epidemic is a strange sort of time. When does it begin? With animal infection? With human infection? How widespread does it have to be, and when does the locality of contagion (‘endemic’) become trans-locality (‘epidemic’) and even globality (‘pandemic’)? Does an epidemic happen in the transmission from one body to another, or is its evental character in the network of relations that constitute it – microbes, animals, humans, airplanes, hospitals, prescription drugs, food, ecosystems, business, tourism, security . . .

Much of the US biodefense standpoint is predicated on the ability to articulate an event – but the event of epidemics tends to frustrate any clear attempt to render it as a discrete or calculable entity. Defense and security depend upon answering the questions of the event, and preparedness, detection and response all assume that there is a reliable means of conceptualizing the threat as an event as a temporality that can be understood as already having passed, and thus as that which will not pass. But, as fields such as network science tell us, the very nature of networks is to pass – to pass between, to pass across, to pass over, to pass through. This topological form of transgression seems to know no limits, passing across species boundaries, national boundaries and social boundaries. In our responses, the temporality peculiar to epidemics – or rather, the temporality that is the network – elicits a kind of counter-temporality, a kind of counter-network,
one that draws into its fold actions that are both exceptional (enforced quarantines, travel restrictions) as well as regulatory (medical surveillance, preventive measures).

In short, the transition from the Department of Health and Human Services’ draft document to its official one — a transition that is, arguably, a metonym for US biodefense generally — displays a conflicted attitude towards the particular threat that epidemics pose. On the one hand, epidemics are defined as discrete events, events that can, with the aid of fields like mathematical epidemiology, be quantified and forecast. On the other hand, beneath this level of quantification and calculability — or, really, because of it — there is the acute awareness of epidemics as essentially ‘complex’ network phenomena; the epidemiologist has to consider the network variables and network effects. Everything circulates, but not everything that circulates is biologically, or politically, or economically ‘healthy’. Some circulations may be seen to benefit the health of the social body (networks of trade and travel), while others, such as epidemics, effectuate diseases that are both literal and metaphorical. Networks, then, can be pathological and pathogenic, even as they are regarded as constitutive of the body politic.

Against the People

This tension within the US pandemic preparedness program is not new. In a way, it implicitly points to a logic inherent in the ancient concept of the epidemic itself. While the Hippocratic Corpus does not ever put forth a unified theory of contagious disease, the seven books on ‘epidemics’ contain a great deal of description of diseases that circulate, that are pervasive, and that become common. Consider the observation of an outbreak of *causus* on the island of Thasos: ‘Under such circumstances, cases of paralysis started to appear during the winter and became common, constituting an epidemic’ (Lloyd, 1983: I.iii.14, 94–5). An epidemic was not necessarily a disease in itself, but rather the condition in which a disease began to be held in common, affecting (and infecting) not just individual patients, but ‘the people’ (*demos*):

> During this time a few people contracted *causus* without being much upset by it, and a few had haemorrhages but did not die of them. Many people suffered from swellings near the ears, in some cases on one side only, in others both sides were involved. (1983: I.i.1, 87)

But the commonality of epidemics is, of course, of a particular type. Abbreviating to the extreme, we can say that epidemics are always ‘against the people’. Epidemics (*epidemia; epi-demos*) are diseases poised against the people, and as such they constitute events that have a mass or aggregate effect. The term *demos* can, of course, have several meanings. For Aristotle, whose ‘political animal’ provided a naturalistic basis for the *polis*, the people continue to be a political entity, and it is precisely because there is the people that there can be a *polis*. For the authors of the Hippocratic
Corpus, however, the term seems to be roughly interchangeable with ‘the patient’, the use of the former denoting a group of individual patients with similar symptoms, while the latter is used for particular, individual cases. Epidemics are ‘against the people’ primarily because ‘the people’ are mortal and constituted by their particular natures (this constitution itself the result of a balance or imbalance of the four humours). Thus demos points to a particular kind of life in Hippocratic medicine, a life that is an aggregate, massifying, collective life. Epidemics strike at the people not just as bare life but as an aggregate, collective life that is nevertheless naturally constituted. Epidemics are, in this sense, something ‘held in common’ that is nevertheless ‘against the people’.

This dichotomy is rendered with great clarity in Thucydides’ account of the Athenian plague, a plague that broke out in the midst of war (Thucydides, 1972). Having decided to bunker themselves inside the city walls against the Spartan siege, the Athenians made themselves ripe for the incubation of disease. According to the traditional theory, when Athenian ships brought supplies to the city’s ports, they also brought disease: rodents, fleas, and the plague bacillus (Hays, 2003; McNeill, 1998). While Thucydides shares the notion of epidemics as ‘against the people’, his use of demos undergoes a transformation not witnessed in the Hippocratic books on epidemics. The plague in Athens, to be sure, did affect individual bodies in horrific ways, and in this sense the plague was against the people in the Hippocratic sense. But Thucydides also notes the social, religious and political crises which the plague ushered forth, as ‘Athens owed to the plague the beginnings of a state of unprecedented lawlessness’ (1972: II.53, 155). Disease not only becomes epidemic, but so does the lawlessness that is a threat to security as well:

Seeing how quick and abrupt were the changes of fortune which came to the rich who suddenly died and to those who had previously been penniless but now inherited their wealth, people now began openly to venture on acts of self-indulgence which before then they used to keep dark. (1972: II.53, 155)

If epidemics are indeed against the people, then the people seem to be positioned between a mass of naturalistic bodies whose constitution is vulnerable, and a body politics whose health is under attack. Is the demos infected by epidemics the same demos affected as a body politic? What the concept of epidemics in these texts demonstrates is the extent to which the first type of demos folds onto the second type of demos.

The Problem of Multiplicities – Foucault’s Three Diagrams

‘[T]he idea of a disease attacking life must be replaced by the much denser notion of pathological life’ (Foucault, 1994). Although he never produced a single, comprehensive work on epidemics, Foucault’s statement is worth considering in this context. Following the publication of Discipline and Punish, Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France began to inquire into
the incorporation of life and the living into state concerns, a process he often
called biopolitical. In particular, the 1978 course, entitled Sécurité,
Territoire, Population (2004), takes up this theme with regard to epidemics
and the notion of public health. Here Foucault offers a schematic that
conceives of three, coexisting levels or, if we want, ‘diagrams’ of power rela-
tions in the body politic: a sovereign and juridical power (‘system of legal
codes’), a power based on discipline (‘disciplinary mechanisms’), and a third
form Foucault variously calls biopolitics or the apparatus of security (les
dispositifs de sécurité). The first operates through interdiction and punish-
ment, and thus law becomes central for sovereignty (which, for Foucault, is
directly related to the capacity to punish or kill); the second operates not
according to law but according to observation, surveillance and correction;
and the third operates not through law or correction, but through means of
calculation and intervention.

What is noteworthy here is not the expository approach of Foucault’s
analysis but the way in which he draws the distinction between sovereignty,
discipline and security/biopolitics. Each diagram of power is correlated to
a diagram of life, one that both authorizes and articulates that power. If
sovereign-juridical power is epitomized, for Foucault, by a highly central-
ized confrontation between sovereign and subject, and if disciplinary power
is epitomized by the more decentralized site of the institution, then this third
type of power relation, security/biopolitics, is characterized by a more
distributed, regulatory process of calculation and modulation:

It [security/biopolitics] has to do with the emergence of technologies of
security at the interior of things, be they mechanisms that are properly mech-
anisms of social control, as in the case of the penal system, or be they mech-
anisms that have for their function the modification of the biological destiny
(destin biologique) of the species. (Foucault, 2004: 12)

This leads to the central problematic that Foucault explores, which is ‘the
correlation between the technique of security and the population as at once
object and subject of these security mechanisms’ (2004: 13). The appara-
tus of security is unique in Foucault’s analysis because it makes use of
informatic methods, including statistics, demographics and public health
records, to insert a global knowledge into the probability of local events; it
identifies and reacts to potential threats based on a whole political economy
of the regulation of state forces; instead of a dichotomy between the permit-
ted and forbidden, it calculates averages and norms upon which discrete
and targeted interventions can be carried out. In a striking turn of phrase,
Foucault suggests that, in this correlation between a distributed power and
a distributed life, what is foregrounded is the ‘problem of multiplicity’ (le
problème des multiplicités).

But what exactly is the life–multiplicity relation that corresponds to
the security–multiplicity relation? To address this question, Foucault makes
reference to public health measures and the case of epidemics. Foucault
takes three, historically separated cases of epidemic disease. The first is that of leprosy during the Middle Ages, the interpretation of and response to which was, as we know, predominantly religious. The second is plague, and, though bubonic plague was recurrent in most of Europe for centuries, we might take the period between the Black Death (ca. 1347–51) and the Great Plague of London (1665) as a sort of periodization. For the third example Foucault mentions the case of smallpox during the 18th century, which again, though occurring in a wide range of locales, we can also locate alongside the development of vaccination. So, Foucault provides us with three epidemics, each with their own historical, political and medical context. Each involves differences not just in symptoms or etiology but in the political responses they elicit. What is the common political challenge to each of these epidemics? One is that each is a kind of ambivalent, threatening form of life that spreads and circulates. Whether construed as divine retribution, as a foreign invasion or as a medical condition, there is this minimal recognition of an epidemic as something-that-passes, and passes between and through the multiplicity of bodies that constitute the body politic – the problem of multiplicities.

Foucault’s argument here is that each type of epidemic can be correlated to a different political response – each diagram of life corresponds to a diagram of power. With leprosy, the political-theological response is to exclude and divide, and this is accomplished through rituals by which the leper is sent outside the city to a colony and pronounced by the Church as ‘dead among the living’ (Watts, 1999). Plague provides a slightly different case. If the political response to leprosy is to exclude and divide, then with plague the response is instead to include and organize. For example, in the mid 14th century, during the Black Death, many Italian city-states set up temporary public health committees to establish quarantine of towns and ships at port, as well as to account for the ill and the dead (Cipolla, 1981; Lindemann, 1999). By the time of London’s Great Plague, the pest houses outside the city were mirrored by efforts to manage and organize the inside of the city. These included elaborate measures for accounting for the plague’s effects (forced quarantine of households, regulation of imported and exported goods, keeping of mortality tables), and were in effect at all levels of governance, from local Watchmen and ‘Searchers of the Dead’ to Aldermen and Justices (Slack, 2003). Though the measures against the plague had not drastically changed since the Black Death, the Great Plague, and the many laws and orders it brought into being, transformed plague into an affair of political economy (though the religious context never completely disappeared). And it is precisely on this point of treatment or intervention that Foucault chooses smallpox as the third example. While the plague response was to include and organize, the smallpox response is transformed by the development of inoculation and vaccination, and their subsequent transformation into public health and hygiene programs. Here the political-economic method of accounting for the plague in London is combined with the ability to treat and even prevent smallpox.
Foucault's comments on leprosy, plague and smallpox are brief; and, given the immense amount of scholarship on each of these diseases, it would not be difficult to dispute the brevity of this characterization on historical grounds. However, what we can glean from this is the notion of a correlation between power and life surrounding the 'problem of multiplicities'. What Foucault provides here is three diagrams of power, three diagrams of political response to epidemic disease, three relations between politics and life: the leprosy diagram excludes and divides, and it does this through juridical-theological law; the plague diagram includes and organizes, and this is accomplished through a disciplinary management of the city; finally, the smallpox diagram calculates and intervenes, and this is achieved through an apparatus of security that places equal emphasis on prevention and response. If we were to transform the diagram into a table, it might look like Table 1.

However – and this is crucial in Foucault's schematic – the problem of multiplicities does not first present itself as a problem with modern security/biopolitics. Sovereign power inscribes multiplicity within territorial limits, and in so doing articulates territory as a relation between inside and outside (the threat of invasion) and as a relation between the body of the king and the body of the subjects or people (the threat of civil war). Discipline, in Foucault's analysis, marks a shift from the lives inscribed in a territory, to the individuated bodies within institutional sites, thereby organizing the interiority of those sites, and those bodies, through practices of drilling, training and so forth. Thus, from this perspective, the diagram of power is always correlated to a diagram of life, one in which their very relation centers around the problem of multiplicities. If sovereignty articulates the life-multiplicity it must order through territory, and if discipline does it through institutionalized, individuated bodies, then what does security do? As hinted at in the title of Foucault's lectures, the apparatus of security broadly shifts the concern from power over a territory to the ability to calculate and intervene in the ongoing self-organization of the population. Here, as elsewhere in Foucault's work, the 'population' is a specific kind of living entity, one that is enumerated, accounted for and literally inscribed through number, tabulation and calculation. But it never ceases to be a living population, a living biomass displaying particular biomedical traits.

Table 1  Foucault’s three diagrams

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<tr>
<th>Diagram</th>
<th>Leprosy</th>
<th>Plague</th>
<th>Smallpox</th>
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<td>Action</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Normalization</td>
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<td>Technique</td>
<td>Divides</td>
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<td>Ontology</td>
<td>Banishment</td>
<td>Quarantine</td>
<td>Vaccination</td>
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<td>Power</td>
<td>Religion/law</td>
<td>Political economy</td>
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<td>Law/sovereignty</td>
<td>Discipline</td>
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We can repeat our former question: what is the life-multiplicity relation that is specific to security/biopolitics? First and foremost is that the ‘problem of multiplicities’ is also a problem of ‘bare life’. It is not simply that power is confronted with the ordering and management of inanimate objects, bodies or persons, but that it confronts life, and thus the problem of the government of the living. But this rather abstract level must be specified, for, as we’ve seen, sovereignty, discipline and security each corresponds to a different form of life, and thus to different political challenges. For security/biopolitics, the problem of living multiplicities is the problem of population: and this new technology that is being established is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass (une masse globale) that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on (see Foucault, 2003: 243 [p. 216 in the French edition]).

If population is in some sense isomorphic with circulation, then it would appear that some circulations are perceived as beneficial (‘for the people’), while others have deleterious effects (‘against the people’). If this is the case, if the circulations that define population are both beneficial and deleterious, then the greatest challenge for power is not simply to forbid or permit circulations, but to calculate and selectively allow circulation to, in effect, flow. Biopolitical flow. In the correlation between security/biopolitics and the life-multiplicity of the population, the greatest challenge to security/biopolitics is how to allow some circulations and to disallow others: ‘circulation understood in the general sense as displacement, as exchange, as contact, as form of dispersion, and as form of distribution – the problem presented is: how can things be ordered such that this circulates or does not circulate’ (Foucault, 2004: 16)?

We are, perhaps, witnessing a transformation in the biopolitics of epidemics, one in which the new criteria for security will be those of networks, flows and circulations. In a contemporary sense, the networks of air travel, airports and hotels, hospitals, places of work, malls, subway systems, and even the postal system are all drawn into a network effect of epidemics. Epidemics circulate, and they do so not just via biological modes of infection, but by social and political modes of contagion, communication and transportation. But not everything must flow, for the network circulations themselves must be secured – a security of circulations. In this very notion – that the network circulations must be secured – lies the central aporia of this mode of preparedness and response. How does one secure something that is by definition complex, unstable and unpredictable? Furthermore, the circulations that must be secured are not just any circulations, but circulations in relation to a collective life that is under threat. Epidemics are ‘exceptional’ in this regard because they situate bare life in relation to the networks, circulations and flows that constitute epidemics. The strange form of life that is the epidemic is at once the life that must be secured, and the life that must be secured against. This is the central
challenge posed by contemporary biodefense. But this now requires that we think bare life as indissociable from the network form that constitutes it.

**Scholastic Demonology**

Let us briefly review some of the components of biopolitics in what Foucault refers to as the ‘problem of multiplicities’. First, there is a concern with the management and governing – and indeed, the production – of a notion of ‘life itself’. But, as we’ve suggested, this is more than a passage between bare life (zoe) and the qualified, ‘good’ life (bios), it is the management of their relationship itself under the more generalized concept of ‘life itself’ (psukhe). Second, the governance of psukhe takes place not just through individuated subjects and bodies, but through the population – which, as a product of statistics and demographics, is configured as a kind of mass, aggregate phenomenon, a statistical biomass. Finally, as a biopolitical form of power, the governance of psukhe in a statistical biomass must take into account what this biomass is and how it is defined – which is in dynamic, temporal terms, as defined by circulation, flux and flow.

Foucault’s three diagrams offer a way of comprehending biopolitics through the example of epidemic disease. It is in Foucault’s last diagram – that of smallpox and the tendency to ‘pull back’, calculate and selectively intervene – that biopolitics reaches its apotheosis, in effect operating on the level of informationally driven speculations and projections. And while this makes sense, especially in light of global pandemics and biodefense, I would like to suggest that there is a hidden genealogy to this Foucauldian biopolitics of flux, flow and circulation. This hidden genealogy is that of demonology, especially as it develops during the Scholastic era. However, it is important to qualify this move – ‘demonology’ in this context has little to do with the Faustian, theological drama of temptation, the pact with the demon and the inverted communion of the Black Mass. Instead, demonology is an early modern instance of a need to govern and manage ‘life’ understood as circulation, flux and flow. This life is not simply spiritual; it is indelibly tied to the porous materiality of bodies. In particular, the problem of demonology presents two characteristics that invite a comparison to the governance of epidemics: first, a phenomenon that operates ‘above’ and ‘below’ the scale of the human (except in this case the scaling is between the bestial and the divine); second, the ontological investment in a life-principle or life-spirit, that is understood to operate in a pervasive, distributed manner across bodies (hence the broader, eschatological sense of ‘contagion’ in the demonological context).

Not surprisingly, the descriptions of demonic possession during the period often overlap with descriptions of epidemic disease. There are, of course, a number of biblical precedents for this analogy. The most well-known of these is the scene in Luke 8: 26–39, in which Jesus performs an exorcism on a man possessed by demons. Jesus asks the demon’s name, and a multitude of voices rings out ‘I am Legion’. The demons are then cast out of the man’s body and into a herd of swine, which then rushed down over a
cliff into the lake and were drowned. The entire scene is depicted in quasi-medical terms, the exorcism as a ‘healing’ or ‘curing’. Scenes such as this provided Scholastic demonology with a set of references against which individual cases of demonic possession could be verified, judged and incorporated into Church doctrine.

The result was not only a new set of juridical procedures, but a new discourse and way of thinking about the supernatural in terms of the unhuman. This culminates in the early modern debates over the ontological status of demonic possession – works such as Jean Bodin’s *De la Démonomanie des sorciers* (1580), Johann Weyer’s *De praestigiis daemonium* (1563) and Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), each participate in shaping this debate. Such texts make their claims on the role that medicine plays in either dispelling demonic possession, or distinguishing it from other non-supernatural causes (e.g. epilepsy, melancholia, trickery). Such debates draw out the boundaries of the demonic, which become formalized in the great early modern ‘handbooks’ on demonology, such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487). In this way, the attempt to control epidemic disease, like that of the attempts to control cases of demonic possession and their potential heresies, is, in modern terms, a problem of multiplicities; or, to be more precise, the political challenges posed by epidemics and demonic possession point to a key relationship, that between sovereignty and multiplicity.

The term ‘Scholastic demonology’ is used by Alain Boureau (2006), whose book *Satan the Heretic* argues for a medieval understanding of the later dissemination of inquisitions and witch-hunts. Boureau suggests that, in the early 14th century, a new awareness of the real effectiveness of demons began to enter into the juridical discourse of the Church. Prior to this, the mainstream view of the Papacy was that demons lacked any real effectiveness in the human world, their activities either being limited to the supernatural domain (presumably in battles with angels), or dismissed as mere trickery and deceit. Often, accusations of demonic affiliation were targeted towards enemies within the Church, rather than towards those outside the Church. In the early 14th century, a group of documents and events (including Papal Bulls, letters, assemblies) point to a concerted effort to link demonic interactions – principally necromancy – with heresy. The interaction with demons is no longer relegated to charlatanry or mere trickery; it begins to become a legitimate threat. Boureau notes three major traits of this shift: the emergence of dualist heretical movements, which stress both divine and demonic interactions with the human world; shifting views of the subject, at once unified in a divine soul, and yet rendered porous, fragile and vulnerable to other-worldly influences; the influence of eschatological interpretations of disasters such as plague, often taken as a sign of the liberation of demons into the human world.

Though medieval thinkers from Anselm to Peter Lombard had commented on Satan and the Fall, it is Thomas Aquinas’ treatise *De malo* (*On Evil*), written in the 1270s, that serves as the blueprint for Scholastic
demonology. Aquinas’ treatise places the demon within an ontological framework of 12 questions, examining not just the biblical role of Satan, but the demon itself as a kind of life form – or, more accurately, as a perturbation within the ‘flow of life’, the *spiritus*. As per his other treatises – most notably, *On Spiritual Creatures* – Aquinas considers demons to be intermediary beings like angels, lacking the absolute omnipotence of God but also lacking the limits of mortality of human beings. Hence placing spiritual creatures within a naturalistic (that is, Aristotelian) framework became a primary concern for thinkers like Aquinas. The theological and ontological status of spiritual creatures was, in effect, an act of boundary-management between the natural and supernatural.

The questions of *De malo* are summarized by Boureau in four rough groupings. These include the nature of demons (e.g. whether demons are corporeal or incorporeal), the Fall and the ‘bad angels’ (e.g. whether they are evil by nature or by will), the capabilities of demons (e.g. the supernatural powers of demons), and the effect of demons on human beings (e.g. possession and the intellect). It is in the final eight questions, in which Aquinas addresses the impact of demons in the human world, that the question of *spiritus* and its disruption or possession is raised. While Aquinas acknowledges the existence of demons as such, his dismissal of demonic powers is strangely modern – demonic signs, possession and necromancy are all given Aristotelian-naturalistic explanations. This is the case when Aquinas discusses the impact demons can have on life processes such as generation and decay, and in particular on the lives of human beings. Here Aquinas notes a key distinction between angels and demons: while the former refrain from the use of their intellect in domains outside their jurisdiction, the latter do not. Aquinas explains demonic possession as a mis-application of demonic intellect outside of its appropriate domain. The demonic is the aberrant intellect that then results in the aberrant form of life that is the possessed subject.

The technique by which the demon does this is through a perturbation of *spiritus*, a term which Aquinas uses in its theological sense of ‘life-spirit’, ‘breath’ or ‘flow of life’. Borrowing from Aristotelian hylomorphism, Aquinas suggests that demonic possession operates neither in the purely supernatural realm, nor purely in the mind of the possessed, but in the intermediary flux that connects them:

... nothing prevents devils (*demones*) from doing whatever can happen by the local movement of corporeal matter, unless they are by divine intervention prevented from doing so. And the appearance or representation of the sensory forms retained in internal sense organs can be accomplished by some local movement of corporeal matter... Therefore, what happens in the case of those asleep regarding the apparitions of dreams from the local movement of vapors and fluids (*spirituum et humorum*) can happen by the like local movement achieved by devils, sometimes in those asleep, and sometimes in those awake. And in the case of those awake, devils can sometimes indeed move internal vapors and fluids (*spiritus et humores*) even to the point that
the use of reason is completely fettered, as is evidently the case with the possessed. (Thomas Aquinas, 2001: q.III, art.iv, 255)

_Spiritus_ is precisely that which mediates the natural and supernatural, earthly and divine – as well as managing the distinction and separation between them. The result, according to Aquinas, can be as simple as erratic behavior or hallucination, or as opaque as necromancy or the raising of the dead. Aquinas makes a key point here, however – the demon does not possess the power to create life, though it may give the impression of animating and re-animating. This is because, for Aquinas, the demon itself is not living, is not animated. Here we must presume that the demon does not have animation in the Aristotelian sense of living, natural beings. And yet it can have the effect of animating. The demon, then, seems to be that which can animate but which itself is not animated; that which perturbs and disturbs the flow of life but which is not itself living.

While Aquinas grants little in the way of real effectiveness to demons, this question of animation and vitalization remains an important part of Scholastic demonology. This is made clearer by Maaike van der Lugt’s recent study on Scholastic demonology, _Le Ver, le démon et la vierge_ (2004). For van der Lugt, the question of demonic generation is not just a question of whether angels or demons have bodies, but whether they partake in the vital processes that having bodies affords. This includes generation and decay, but also digestion, putrefaction, respiration, even communication.

Van der Lugt’s study thus takes up the Thomistic notion of the demonic _spiritus_, and pays particular attention to the role of vital or life properties in supernatural creatures. Her work focuses on the tradition of Scholastic demonology as it was influenced by Aquinas in the works of Peter John Olivi, Jean Quidort and John Duns Scotus. In her readings of Scholastic thinkers, van der Lugt focuses on the idea of ‘demonic generation’, or the capacity of the demon to take on human or animal life qualities:

In the theological discourse, the concept of the possessed body presupposes and is opposed to the notion of life and the human person. The Scholastics had refined and made more precise this distinction between the possessed body and the living body in a series of questions concerning the activities of angels and demons at the moment of their appearance. They asked themselves to what degree angels and demons could take advantage of the possessed body. Were they capable of feeling, of moving, of speaking, or eating, or, finally, of generating life? Could they, according to the expression of Saint Thomas, exercise the _opera vitae_? (2004: 238)

Van der Lugt highlights several terms that were central to Scholastic demonology. There was, first, this taking on of vital properties that are the ‘vital works’ or ‘vital signs’ of the demon, what Aquinas and other Scholastics referred to as _opera vitae_. But the _opera vitae_ presumed a more basic action, which was the occupying of the body and, by extension, the occupation of vital or life forces, resulting in the possessed or ‘assumed’ body,
the *corpora assumpta*. The *corpora assumpta*, or the endowing of (human) life to the non-living (demon), produced a strange disunity within the body, manifested in the vital signs or *opera vitae* of the demon.

For van der Lugt, like Boureau, Scholastic demonology confronts a number of challenges, challenges which at first glance are purely philosophical, but which mask what is really a political challenge. The need to be able to identify, analyze and judge demonic possession was important for several reasons. A theory of demons was required to distinguish the Scholastic demon from the classical *daimon* and its influence in Neoplatonic and Arabic philosophies. Such a theory was also required in order to distinguish the Church’s view of the demon from that of heretical movements such as Catharism. Finally, the influence of Aristotelian natural philosophy brought with it the desire to establish classifications of supernatural creatures, including demons.

At stake in the development of Scholastic demonology is the extent to which a form of power can be produced that at once posits a supernatural – or, we might say, unhuman – field of non-human circulations and flows, and that also posits the capacity to govern those circulations and flows. At stake, in other words, is the governance of the non-human or the unhuman, the biopolitics of life-beyond-life – a supernatural biopolitics?

There is a final twist to this ‘biopolitics’ of the demon. In Scholastic demonology, demonic possession involves not just the life of the demon itself as a supernatural creature, but the vitalization of the demon by the body of the possessed. In this sense, demonic possession is not an appropriation of body or life, but rather the taking-on of life-processes. It is the ‘ensouling’, in Aristotelian terms (*empsukhe*) of that which is not living, the vitalization of the non-living. This is an important distinction. Demons often possess non-living things as well as living bodies. This is what Boureau refers to as the ‘epidemiological’ demon, the demon that enters the host unawares, through food, via objects, or even borne on the wind. The demon – that which is not animated but which animates – is also that which animates the inanimate – objects, mists, clouds, even the bodies of the dead. Demons can thus often take on an ‘elemental’ quality. In such cases, the demonic becomes almost purely abstract, becomes nearly identical to multiplicity itself.

Not only was Scholastic demonology – and the Church laws that elicited it – concerned with the identification and verification of the demonic, and not only was it important to be able to distinguish divine possessions from demonic ones, but there was also a concern with the ‘spiritual biopolitics’ of life-forces or principles of animation, a biopolitics of *spiritus*. As Boureau notes, Scholastic demonology had ‘described the zones of emptiness and fragility in the human personality’, and had inadvertently produced a ‘holey’ theory of the subject:

Divine rapture was the mirror image of diabolical possession, which itself was held in the obscurity of extracted confessions, denials, or medical loopholes.
The analogous nature of possessions, either divine or diabolical, was the result of a similarity in the modes of action of the *spiritus*, of the divine spirit, either angelic or demonic. (2006: 174)

One result is that the presence of demons in the human world necessitates a mode of governance in which their processes of contagion and circulation can be controlled. The insight of Boureau’s book is that the problem that demons represent is not simply that of interdiction or prohibition. There is no ‘stamping-out’ of demons. Rather, the admission of divine possession seems to entail the minimal admission of demonic possession as well. What is at stake is less the destruction of an enemy, and more the production of a way of managing the supernatural domain as it impacts the human world. Let us put this in more secular terms. At stake in Scholastic demonology is a mode of governance of unhuman circulation, flow and flux which at once constitutes the human and yet remains ‘above’ or ‘below’ it (calling it ‘supernatural’ is inaccurate; we would do better to call it ‘surnatural’ akin to ‘surreal’).

**Eschatology and the Biological Disaster**

From this vantage point, the real challenge for sovereignty is not simply in its juridical-legal function. Nor is it only in the anomic space created by the state of exception. What is at stake, in the case of epidemics, is this little phrase from Foucault that we’ve been returning to – the ‘problem of multiplicities’, a problem which is that of managing the circulations that are deemed to be ‘for the people’ and ‘against the people’. The real challenge of sovereignty is in the form it takes vis-a-vis the multiplicity that is identified as the threat. Sovereignty would here be the ability to articulate a topology within which it can exclusively intervene, thereby selectively perturbing a network, a circulation *that is already self-governing*.

In this sense, the very relation between sovereignty and multiplicity is based on a realization that networks only fail when they succeed, that circulations are only obstructed when they are flowing. What makes for an effective epidemic? It is not only the contagiousness of the microbe, but the means of its transport (animal-to-person, person-to-person, town-to-town, port-to-port). An epidemic can only be an epidemic – and not simply ‘endemic’ – if all circulations are flowing, if the networks of trade and travel are correctly functioning. Nothing ‘fails’ – indeed, everything is working perfectly; but it is for this very reason that nothing fails that everything can fail, that everything is vulnerable. In a sense, the threat is less the microbe in itself than the networks or circulations themselves. This means that the sovereign exception, in the case of epidemics, will be measured by its effective topological interventions – on knowing when, where, and how to intervene. And this, as we’ve suggested, is itself dependent on sovereignty itself becoming a multiplicity. The key to understanding this relation between sovereignty and multiplicity is that epidemics reveal two topological
layers to networks – ‘for the people’ (trade, travel) and ‘against the people’ (disease) – and that these are the same network.

It would be a mistake to assume that epidemics-as-multiplicities present, in a kind of neo-romantic manner, an affront or resistance to sovereign power. There is no ‘being on the side of’ epidemics; epidemics are against everyone, profoundly misanthropic examples of global networks and circulations. We return to our term, epidemic (epi-demos). Indeed, it becomes difficult to conceive of a network for the people without at least a minimal consideration of that same network operating in non-human ways against the people.

If we go over our term once again – epi-demos – we might ask a further question. In what ways are epidemics conceived as not just being ‘for’ or ‘against’ the people, but being ‘beyond’ the people? But how can something that circulates through the people, from person to person, be beyond the people? We know that epidemics are thoroughly political and social in the impact they have; they are also thoroughly artificial in the sense of their increasingly sophisticated forms of technoscientific mediation. But there is always, it seems, an assumption concerning the reserve of the natural (bare life as a natural disaster) that is identified as a threat precisely because it exceeds or circumvents human instrumentality, precisely because it presents to the sovereign decision the problem of multiplicities.

The challenge that epidemics put forth to sovereign power is how to establish an intervention into the bare and natural workings of life. The challenge to sovereignty is to conceive of epidemics as exceptional; but this would mean that any intervention in epidemics would also be exceptional. In this sense, sovereignty is the ability to intervene in – and temporarily suspend – what is understood to be the natural workings of life. But such an intervention would require a set of exceptional techniques for doing so. And this would be tantamount to saying that any effort to prevent, thwart, or quell epidemics would take on the guise of political theology.

Notes
1. This project has sparked a lively debate on the politics of health surveillance. The websites of the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control contain a number of documents on this topic. For public health perspectives, see Mikanatha et al. (2007). Andrew Lakoff’s (2008) work perceptively points to the connections between Foucault’s notion of security and contemporary biopreparedness. I have tried to frame biosurveillance within the political-philosophical context of the body politic (Thacker, 2004).

2. People in perfect health suddenly began to have burning feelings in the head; their eyes became red and inflamed; inside their mouths there was bleeding from the throat and tongue. . . . In most cases there were attacks of ineffectual retching, producing violent spasms . . . the skin was rather reddish and livid, breaking out into small pustules and ulcers . . . (Thucydides, 1972: II.49, 153)
3. All translations from this text are my own.
4. ‘The problem of multiplicities is one that is encountered already in relation to sovereignty and in relation to discipline’ (Foucault, 2004: 13).
5. This idea is developed in a more contemporary vein in The Exploit (Galloway and Thacker, 2007).

References

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