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# SOME FOUCAULDIAN NOTES ON NEOLIBERAL BIOPOLITICS AND ITS CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article aims at applying the concept of biopolitics to the analysis of neoliberalism understood as an historical form of the exercise of power. The first part briefly focuses on the foucaultian elaboration of the concept, bringing it back to the building site of studies on biopower opened after '68. The second part focuses on some aspects of the biopolitics of the welfare state and the neoliberal one, pointing out the historical transition from one to the other, underlining the differences between them. The third part proposes an hypothesis on the contemporary crisis of neoliberalism and its processes of subjectivation, getting to an assumption on the way in which, in pandemic capitalism, the Recovery Fund partially modifies the european neoliberal program by recovering planning elements rejected for decades as the antithesis of market freedom. However, the conclusion is that, contrary to what is hoped for by a certain euro-optimism, the suspension of the stability pact is unlikely to be followed by the spontaneous affirmation of a new post-pandemic welfare without the promotion of transnational political action.

## Keywords

Michel Foucault, biopolitics, Welfare State, neoliberalism, Recovery Fund.

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## Resumen

Este artículo pretende aplicar el concepto de biopolítica al análisis del neoliberalismo entendido como una forma histórica de ejercicio del poder. La primera parte se centra brevemente en la elaboración foucaultiana del concepto, devolviéndolo a la obra de los estudios sobre el biopoder abiertos después del 68. La segunda parte se centra en algunos aspectos de la biopolítica del estado de bienestar y del neoliberal, señalando la transición histórica de uno a otro, subrayando las diferencias entre ambos. La tercera parte propone una hipótesis sobre la crisis contemporánea del neoliberalismo y sus procesos de subjetivación, llegando a una suposición sobre la forma en que, en el capitalismo pandémico, el Fondo de Recuperación modifica parcialmente el programa neoliberal europeo al recuperar elementos de planificación rechazados durante décadas como antítesis de la libertad de mercado. Sin embargo, la conclusión es que, al contrario de lo que espera cierto eurooptimismo, es poco probable que la suspensión del pacto de estabilidad vaya seguida de la afirmación espontánea de un nuevo bienestar post-pandémico sin el fomento de la acción política transnacional.

## Palabras clave

Michel Foucault, biopolítica, Estado de bienestar, neoliberalismo, Fondo de recuperación.

## Preface

This essay proposes a Foucaultian development of the concept of biopolitics for an ontology of actuality understood as the “historical ontology of ourselves, in our relations with a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects” (Foucault, 2008a, p. 285; Foucault, 1984). The ontology of actuality seeks to investigate the historical constitution of being in its “radical immanence” (Domenicali, 2010, pp. 145, 150). As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have emphasized, it aims to produce a critical discourse on our historical being and the present time, of which it shows not only its

contingency – together with its meaning and tendencies – but also its “*actuel*”: the “now of our becoming” that can introduce political discontinuity into the present (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 112). For this reason the ontology of actuality must be understood as an ethos in which “the critique of what we are is, at the same time, a historical analysis of the limits posed on us and the proof of their possible overcoming” (Foucault, 1984, p. 231).

The concept of biopolitics deployed here is distinct from “*koiné* biopolitics” (Marramao, 2015). The battlefield on which the most influential theorists of biopolitics are engaged—Giorgio Agamben’s negative biopolitics, Roberto Esposito’s affirmative biopolitics, and Antonio Negri’s multitudinal biopolitics<sup>2</sup>—is only kept in the background. In this text, the concept of biopolitics is only applied to the analysis of neoliberalism understood as a historical manifestation of power. Its affirmation and its contemporary crisis are investigated starting from the reconstruction of Foucault’s hypothesis. In the first and shorter part, the text demonstrates the way in which the concepts of biopower and biopolitics emerge in the construction of Foucaultian thought. The second part of the text focuses on a number of aspects of the Foucaultian analysis of the biopolitics of the Welfare State and neoliberal biopolitics, pointing out the transition from the former to the latter. Finally, the third part proposes a hypothesis on the contemporary crisis of neoliberalism and its processes of subjectivation, up to and including the present day.

## Michel Foucault, Biopower, Biopolitics

For Gilles Deleuze, Foucault’s thought “did not involve, but proceeded by crises”: crises in which both the condition of possibility of his creativity and his “intimate coherence” must be thought (Deleuze, 2003, p. 115). The crisis that pushes Foucault to deepen the classical problem of the relation between power and subject—which he will continuously confront (albeit in different ways) from the beginning of the 1970s until his death (Foucault, 1989, p. 237) —is undoubtedly the crisis of ’68. He notes this point himself, stating in a famous interview that ’68 clarified a fact: “it was no longer possible to be governed in a certain way” (Trombadori, 1981, p. 77). The rise of anti-authoritarian and anti-disciplinarian movements had radically called into question “the way

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2. On these theories of biopolitics, cfr. at least Chignola, 2018; Bazzicalupo, 2010; Palano, 2012; Traverso, 2009; Di Pierro, 2018.

of leading and governing men” (Trombadori, 1981, p. 75)<sup>3</sup>. For Foucault, it is then a matter of answering the demand for theoretical and political renewal coming from the movements and also studying power outside of the Hobbesian model of the Leviathan. Beyond the field delimited by juridical sovereignty and the institution of the State, outside of the juridical model, it is now a matter of conceiving the exercise of power starting from “the techniques and tactics of domination” (Foucault, 1997, p. 34).

It is in this way that, as is well known, Foucault begins to elaborate an analytic of power which keeps the processes of material subjugation of the bodies and minds of living beings at its center. The “biopolitics” of *Il faut défendre la société* and *La volonté de savoir* enters onto the scene. In these works, Foucault argues that in modernity the relation of power with the life of subjects undergoes a fundamental metamorphosis. In feudal societies, power essentially manifested itself as the “right to *take* life or *let* live”; a power that was exercised *negatively* as a “means of deduction” over things, time, bodies, and finally life, which the sovereign can put to death (Foucault, 1978, p. 136). In modernity, on the contrary, life enters “in the field of the explicit calculations” of power, which becomes “the power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death”. In other words, a power that *positively* takes over life and its production, in an attempt to increase its forces instead of blocking its development (Foucault, 1978, p. 136). To respond to new challenges such as the population explosion and the industrialization process, modern biopower must “manage life” and it does so according to two main historical modalities: discipline and biopolitics (Foucault, 1978, p. 139)<sup>4</sup>.

Starting in the seventeenth century, disciplinary power is exercised on singular members of the popular multitude in order to strengthen the aptitudes and usefulness of bodies. In this way, Foucault writes, an entire “political anatomy of the human body” takes shape, whose scope is forming individuals who are well-integrated with social imperatives: individuals from which to extract the “maximum of forces and time” (Foucault, 1995, p. 192). This “political anatomy” will unfold for centuries through the key institutions of the disciplinary society: the army, the school, the hospital, the family, the prison, and of course the factory. For Foucault, these institutions all aim at producing “docile bodies”: bodies obedient to State command and suitable for the objectives of the capitalist economy in the process of formation (Foucault, 1996, pp. 135-169). This task also requires the preparation of adequate strategies for the moralization of the prole-

3. For one development of this theme, cfr. Simoncini, 2009.

4. “One might say that the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (Foucault, 1978, p. 138).

tariat that are capable of producing even the *docile souls* of workers<sup>5</sup>. In dialogue with Marx, Foucault shows how there is no capital accumulation without the accumulation of subjects who will have to work in manufacturing and the nascent industry. And it is precisely disciplinary power which makes time and the human body—in a word their lives—into a productive force, i.e., something adaptable to the capital relation and binding to “the apparatus of production through which they work” (Foucault, 2007, p. 148). The worker’s body, Foucault argues, thus becomes the “eminent target of disciplinary power [precisely] because ‘labor power’ must be transformed into ‘productive force’” (Mezzadra, 2020, pp. 73-95)<sup>6</sup>.

The other modality of biopower, which in modern societies is grafted onto disciplinary power, is what Foucault calls the “biopolitics of population”. Historically, biopolitics will give body and reality to all those devices of power-knowledge that States will set up in order to regulate the vital processes of populations, starting with the control of demographic processes, birth rates, death rates, morbidity, health, longevity, risk, and environment. At the end of the eighteenth century a whole series of security technologies will arise that will try to stem the risks of collective phenomena such as excessive population growth, famines, and epidemics. Together with the work of discipline—which for their part guarantees “the controlled insertion of bodies into the production apparatus”—biopolitics will thus aim to allow the “adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes” (Foucault, 1978, p. 141). The ultimate aim of biopolitics is to allow the development of the vital processes of a population. In this way, it will be possible to enhance its force, strengthening the productive system and—in the final analysis—“the power of the State” (Foucault, 2001, p. 980). Hence the fundamental role of modern medical power and “noso-politics” which in the West, from the eighteenth century onwards, will seek to make society a milieu of physical wellbeing and longevity. From that moment—in order to increase the power of the State—the raising of the health level of the population through the struggle against major epidemics, the reduction of the morbidity coefficient, and the lengthening of the average lifespan will appear as a central objective of the new “governmental reason”. In addition, the care of individuals will become “a duty of the State” (Foucault, 1992, p. 137)<sup>7</sup>, but only because “the individual in good health [is] in the service of the State” (Foucault, 2001a, p. 41). This is according to a logic whereby health is conceived as the simple “correlation of

5. Cfr. Foucault, 2015. For a further examination of this theme, cfr. Simoncini, 2020.

6. On this theme, cfr. Pandolfi, 2017 and Brion, 2014.

7. Cfr. also Foucault, 1974a, p. 521; 1974b, p. 210; Foucault 1979.

government to labor-power” or, if one prefers, as a “state imperative in the formation of the productive body” (Sebastianelli, p. 2021). It is in fact necessary to be able to have a multitude of individuals who are healthy enough to work in an efficient and productive way.

In summary then, for Foucault, the disciplinary and regulatory rationality of modern biopower is describable with the formula *omnes et singulatim*: in modern societies, biopower aims to govern the life of each and all. On the one hand, it disciplines individuals and on the other, it biopolitically regulates the life of the population in order to enhance it to the maximum degree, synchronizing it to the State machine and the valorization of capital.

## **From the Biopolitics of Welfare to Neoliberal Biopolitics**

For Foucault, a good example of disciplinary biopolitics is the Welfare State. Indeed, in *The Birth of Biopolitics* he shows how between the 1930s and 1960s—between the Rooseveltian New Deal and the affirmation of European social democratic Welfare States—Welfare emerged initially as a response to the great crisis of classical liberalism, and then, in its more mature forms, as a driving force for the affirmation of social rights. The Welfare State, however, did not arise as a package of policies simply aimed at replacing the liberal State. Rather, it emerges as an “internal strategy of liberal governmentality”: on the one hand, it accepts the latter with its main conceptual axis (the triad of freedom/property/market), and on the other, it proposes itself as a mode of governing the vital processes of the population that is capable of effectively responding “to the ‘social question’ and withstanding the challenge of growing insecurity” brought about by the market itself (Costa, 2017, p. 87). With its welfare, social security, medical, accident prevention, school (and so on) apparatuses, the Welfare State will set up a biopolitical apparatus centered on the policies and technologies of social security. The objective will be making the life of the population safe from the risks of disease, old age, ignorance, and non-subsistence: all of these phenomena as a whole whose danger and risk—potentially explosive—must be traced back to a homeostatic and acceptable equilibrium. By means of a strategy of the “socialization of risks”, the Welfare State therefore aims to govern the life of the population by rendering it compatible with the order of a civilized capitalism, so to speak<sup>8</sup>.

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8. On the Welfare State as a strategy of the socialization of risk, with an explicitly Foucaultian approach, cfr. Procacci, 1998a, p. 232.

For Foucault, the emblem of this new governmental rationality is the Beveridge Plan, a programmatic ratio of the postwar British Welfare State and a model of the health policies adopted by European States after the end of World War II (Sebastianelli, 2021). What is most important for Foucault, however, is not that the State takes charge of healthcare with the Beveridge Plan. This “is not new since, as we have seen, starting from the eighteenth century one of the functions of the State is to guarantee the physical health of its citizens” (Foucault, 2001a, p. 41). What matters most is that through the Beveridge Plan “the concept of the State in service of the healthy individual replaces the concept of the healthy individual in service to the State” (Foucault, 2001a, p. 41). In other words, there is a reversal in the way of conceiving health with the Beveridge Plan. If until the mid-twentieth century guaranteeing health meant that the State preserved its “national physical strength, its own labor power, its own productive capacity, its own military power”—and State medicine mainly had “if not racist, at least nationalist purposes”—with the Beveridge Plan, health was instead understood by States as an “object of preoccupation ... not for themselves but for individuals” (Foucault, 2001a, p. 41). The “the right of man to keep his body in good health becomes the object of State action”, an action that does not stop at aiming for a good social system (Foucault, 2001a, p. 41). Thus, on the one hand the biopolitics of Welfare guarantees the improvement of living conditions and social rights, while on the other it ensures the reproduction of the necessary labor power and good maintenance of the capitalist order<sup>9</sup>.

This specific assemblage of the government of the living—which matured as disciplinary society reached its apex in the Fordist-Taylorist factory—was opposed by the movements of '68 and the 1970s. These movements contested the patriarchal, disciplinary, and nationalist limits of the Welfare State and demanded greater spaces for democracy, as well as freedom and equality for women, workers, and minorities<sup>10</sup>. In the decades that followed, by subsuming the libertarian elements of the movements—the social critique and the artistic critique with which they were innervated—capitalism will forge its “new spirit”<sup>11</sup>. But precisely against these movements—and at the same time against the Welfare State itself—neoliberalism will launch its strong offensive, which became victorious at the end of the 1970s. From this moment, as David Harvey has written, the set of processes of the conservative revolution (or capitalist restoration) took shape which over the last four decades, in the context of a powerful financial

9. For three influential applications of Foucaultian intuitions on genealogy and on the development of the Welfare State as a governing apparatus of the population, cfr. Ewald, 1986; Castel, 1996; Procacci, 1998b.

10. On the multiple ruptures caused by '68, cfr. the contributions in Bussoni & Martino, 2019.

11. Cfr. Boltanski & Chiapello, 2014.

expansion of global capitalism, has re-established itself and consolidated the power of the capitalist class in the world, creating an “incredible concentration of wealth and power” (Harvey, 2010, p. 44). In this way—together with the precariousness of labor, the progressive dismantling of the Welfare State, and the erosion of social democracy built in the previous decades on the thrust of the conflict—what the British political scientist Colin Crouch had called “post-democracy” is affirmed, namely a regime of representative government which preserves democratic forms (elections, rights of association and freedom of the expression of thought) while emptying them of their substance (social rights, participation, conflict, the idea of self-government). This is a regime in which “politics is decided in private by the integration between elected governments and elites who represent almost exclusively economic interests” (Crouch, 2003, p. 6).

Foucault was unable to witness the full unfolding of these processes, hence his silence on financial hegemony or the binding nexus between neoliberalism and the de-democratization of democracy.<sup>12</sup> However, in the seminal *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault was among the very first to demonstrate how neoliberalism was not only the driving force of the capitalist counter-revolution but also the incubator of a new way of governing the living and a radically alternative biopolitics to that of the Welfare State. This is not because, as is often erroneously believed, the State has no role in the art of neoliberal government, but on the contrary precisely because it plays a decisive and unprecedented role in it. When analyzing them in their relevant differences, in the texts of the American neoliberals and those of the German ordoliberalists, Foucault sees a common underlying inspiration in his 1979 lecture course at the Collège de France<sup>13</sup>. Contrary to what classical liberals, whose ideas will be overwhelmed by the crisis of '29, believed, both schools in fact share the idea that the reproduction of the market order is not spontaneous<sup>14</sup>. Rather, as Massimo De Carolis has rightly noted, it is a result of “capillary government action, technically advanced and openly intent on penetrating into every minimum recess of life” (De Carolis, 2017, p. 54). And it is in this sense that we can speak of a neoliberal biopolitics: a “biopolitics as governmentality” that entrusts the security of the system and the growth of social wealth to the capacity of individuals to dynamically and responsibly adapt to the demand for flexibility that incessantly comes from the market (Bazzicalupo, 2015).

12. On the processes of de-democratization of democracy, with reference to Foucault, cfr. Brown, 2015. On the relationship between neoliberalism and de-democratization, cfr. Balibar, 2012, pp. 134-154.

13. Foucault concentrates particularly on the texts of American neoliberals such as Irving Fisher and Gary Becker, the head of the Austro-American school Friedrich von Hayek, and the German ordoliberalists Walter Eucken, Alfred Rüstow, and Wilhelm Röpke. The latter three authors, who were gathered around the journal *Ordo* in the 1930s, were subsequently very influential in the construction of the European Union and its conception of governmentality.

14. Cfr. Foucault, 2008b.

Of course, due to the programmatic rationality of neoliberalism, the State cannot and must not intervene in the dynamics of prices or the game of competition. Nor must it act “because of the market”, namely by regulating the contradictions that the market naturally produces, as instead happens in Keynesian policies (Foucault, 2008b, p. 121). For both of the souls of neoliberalism, the State instead must continually act “for the market”, i.e., in order to prepare the necessary juridico-institutional apparatuses capable of making competition “the new reason of the world” (Foucault, 2008b, p. 121)<sup>15</sup>. The activity of the markets must not get in the way and the State must work in order to “establish markets where they did not exist before: in public administration” (with the logic of the New Public Management), in schools, in healthcare, which by social right tend to become the object of a market demand (Boarelli, 2020, p. 58). For the neoliberal utopia, the State must accompany “the market from start to finish” (Foucault, 2008b, p. 121). It must be capable of constitutionalizing liberal principles (private property, price stability, prohibition of trusts, competition, budget discipline) by removing them from political dispute and social conflict, i.e., it must be capable of politically guaranteeing what the ordoliberalists call an “economic constitution”<sup>16</sup>. As Franz Böhm argued, it must be elevated “to the rank of norm on the basis of a deliberate political decision” (Böhm, 1937, p. 54): its purpose is “to influence the behavior of individuals and groups in order to regulate their actions” (Zanini, 2019).

In other words, the State must constitutionalize competition by making it a factor of sociality and a pedagogical apparatus capable of educating the correct use of freedom, in such a way that it is no longer the case that the market is “supervised by the State”, but rather that the State is “under the supervision of the market” (Foucault, 2008b, p. 116)<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, neoliberalism is a “politico-pedagogical project that aims to transform the ‘heart and soul’ of people” through a genuine “moral orthopedics” (Greblo, 2021, pp. 182-183). In short, with its action, State apparatuses must generate the conditions so that all subjects can align themselves with the logic of competition—internalizing it—in a “performance society” (Chicchi & Simone, 2017): a society in which, relying on the exaltation of the individual freedom, all individuals—even subordinate and precarious workers—are pushed to conceive themselves as performative entrepreneurs of themselves. As subjects, that is, dedicated to the “ethos of self-valorization”, continuously

15. On neoliberalism as a new reason of the world, cfr. the now classic Dardot & Laval 2009.

16. On this theme, cfr. at least Dardot & Laval, 2009, p. 351; Dardot & Laval, 2016, pp. 59-71; Ricciardi, 2016; Ricciardi, 2017; Somma, 2014a; Malatesta, 2020; Malatesta, 2019.

17. Developing Foucault’s comments, Marco D’Eramo has argued that States are now judged by how they favor the market economy and “compete with each other in order to govern in service of merchants” (2021, p. 99).

urged to invest their own “human capital”, in the words of Gary Becker, in order to then use it relentlessly in market competition (Foucault, 2008b, pp. 215-238; Dardot & Laval, 2009, pp. 402-456). This is in fact the only energetic power that neoliberals believe is capable of giving shape to an organic society: a “formed society” (*Formierten Gesellschaft*), as the ordoliberal Ludwig Erhard will call it, from which to radically ban social conflict and conflict between classes (Erhard, 1965, pp. 700-721)<sup>18</sup>. And a society in which traditional and community values flank competitive dynamics, tempering their potentially disruptive effects and thus guaranteeing market order<sup>19</sup>.

For Foucault, the goal of the neoliberal program, and specifically the program of ordoliberalism, is the “formalization of society on the model of business”: everyone must become value-generating subjects and the very life of each individual must be transformed into a species of “permanent and multiple enterprise” (Foucault, 2008b, p. 241). In other words, by means of what Alexander Rüstow called *Vitalpolitik* (Rüstow, 1951, pp. 453-459; Rüstow, 1957, pp. 215-238)<sup>20</sup>, it is necessary “to transform all individuals into capitalists” (Chicchi & Simone, 2017, p. 65). The goal is to give shape to a “popular capitalism” in which the wage worker “is also in turn a capitalist”, i.e., “is no longer a proletarian” (Bilger, 1964, p. 186)<sup>21</sup>. The social difference between capitalist and wage worker therefore must be transfigured and the conflict between these two figures must be erased. In the mid-1940s, Wilhelm Röpke had synthesized this by arguing that neoliberalism should have made “of proletarians, just as many owners” (Röpke, 1951, p. 24)<sup>22</sup>. In other words, wage workers should no longer perceive themselves as proletarians, but rather as subjects who produce an income from their human capital, in full adherence to the axiomatic of capital.

Thus, in the name of an emphasized individual freedom, neoliberalism understood as an anthropological and biopolitical apparatus aims to produce subjectivities by aligning them with the logic of competition and proprietary order. Through the ordinary functioning of competition, designed to valorize the vital matrices most suitable for the functioning of corporate apparatuses, the apparatus of the “neoliberal capture of life” (Bazzicalupo, 2015, p. 27) is constantly reproduced. As Wendy Brown has observed, the citizen—the *homo politicus*—is reconfigured in this way by the apparatuses

18. On the concept of the “formed society” as an order capable of “synthesizing the combination of ‘economic dynamism’ and ‘social stability’”, cfr. Somma, 2011.

19. On the conservatism of Rüstow and Röpke, cfr. Somma, 2014b, pp. 53-55; Somma, 2014a, pp. 66-70; Solchany, 2015.

20. On this theme, cf. Foucault, 2008b, 148 and 157; Comisso, 2017, pp. 205ff.

21. Bilger is one of the first analysts of German neoliberalism and one of the main sources of Foucault’s *Birth of Biopolitics*.

22. If he did not succeed, Röpke stated in 1944, everyone would become proletarian: “from one moment to the next by revolutionary means (as in Russia)” or “gradually (as in most other countries)” (1947, p. 240).

of neoliberal government as a *homo oeconomicus* who must exclusively aim at affirming himself by obtaining the maximum return from the investment of his own human capital (Brown, 2015, pp. 79-111)<sup>23</sup>. In other words, he must deserve his own success, constantly discipline himself in order to avoid being included among the undeserving, and place blame on himself for any failure, according to a logic whereby meritocracy becomes the new “theodicy of neo-capitalism” and inequality<sup>24</sup>. For the neoliberals, therefore, it is not only a question of changing the economy because, as Margaret Thatcher will announce at the outset of the neoliberal age, “the economy is the method, the goal is to change hearts and minds” (Thatcher, 1981). Privatization, then, is not only the hoarding of public goods, institutions, and enterprises for the sake of profit, but also a “value and practice [which] penetrates deeply into the culture of the citizen subject” (Brown, 2006, p. 703); or, if one prefers, the “privatization of heads” aimed at convincing everyone that the relation to market competition is “the only relation between human beings” (D’Eramo, 2021, p. 117). Collective political action thus becomes futile in the face of individual, goal orientated action, which is the only *useful* action<sup>25</sup>.

In other words, Foucault sees that neoliberalism is also—and perhaps above all—an anthropological project with which a biopolitics that is diametrically opposed to that of the Welfare State takes shape<sup>26</sup>. By setting up a State in its strong way, because it is capable of continuously deciding for the market, the neoliberal biopolitics of the population essentially relies on the capacity of individuals to self-activate and continuously adapt their ways of life and mentalities to an “intrinsically changing economic order based on generalized competition” (Dardot & Laval, 2009, p. 175)<sup>27</sup>. It is this “living dangerously”—due to the vacillating of social protections and the scarcity of common resources—that unites American and German neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008b, p. 66). For both, women and men must perceive themselves as capitalists without the collective supports guaranteed by Welfare and find themselves in fact to be “individuals by default”<sup>28</sup>: individuals governed by a “duty to perform” which constantly exposes them

23. Brown criticizes Foucault for not considering the figure of the *homo politicus* in his genealogy of governmentality and excessively emphasizing the *homo oeconomicus*. On the theoretico-political weakness of this critique, cfr. Rudan, 2015.

24. Cfr. Cingari, 2020, p. 17.

25. Edoardo Greblo observes how, aiming to insert the subject into integral competition, the “orthopedic” action of neoliberalism does not only intervene on the political level, where it conceives women and men as “social monads acting in terms of egocentric calculation,” but also on the moral level. For Greblo, in fact, neoliberalism causes “the inversion of the second categorical imperative” because it pushes the individual to see “herself and the other person always as a means and never only as an end” (2021, pp. 190-191).

26. Cfr. Laval, 2014.

27. On the German ordoliberal conception of the State, cfr. Mesini, 2019; Malatesta, 2019; Comisso, 2017, pp. 196-205.

28. Cfr. Castel & Haroche, 2013.

to failure as well as the risk of depression, the consequent outcome of a life punctuated by the “fatigue of being oneself” (Han, 2012; Ehrenberg, 1998).

This is one of the salient aspects of the apparatus of the production of subjectivity which, in recent decades, the neoliberal mode of government has hegemonically imposed on our societies: societies of performance in which an incessant “marketing of subjectivity” has established itself through which the business-form progressively dresses the “subject of performance” by adapting it to the new logics of post-Fordist value extraction and to the “productive needs of post-industrial capitalism” (Chicchi & Simone 2017, p. 81)<sup>29</sup>: in capitalism life is never “bare” but always clothed, i.e., produced and reproduced by a plurality of powers and knowledge that aim to make it suitable to the corporate order and the processes of capital valorization. As Byung-Chul Han has written, the subject of performance believes himself to be free, but actually is a “slave”: an absolute slave “to the extent that he exploits himself without a master” (Han, 2016, pp. 9-10): according to a dynamic where, in fact, it is freedom itself to “open the possibility of a free choice for non-freedom” (Zanardi, 2018). With Pierre Bourdieu, one could speak of a “symbolic violence” with which the neoliberal program aims to extort “submissions which are not perceived as such” (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 18)<sup>30</sup>: a symbolic violence of the most material effects with the aim of pushing the dominated to naturalize the relations of domination, internalizing the values that make them subordinate. Foucault, moreover, had already observed that the neoliberal subject, the self-governing *homo oeconomicus*, is “he who is eminently governable” (Foucault, 2008b, p. 270). In other words, “the double bind of the injunction to be free and to self-govern” produces a “freedom that coexists with a heteronomy without synthesis”: neoliberal freedom is always “free obedience” deriving from the “self-regulation of the governed” (Bazzicalupo, 2015, p. 36).

In continuity with the new neoliberal reason of the world, the marketing of subjectivity incites women and men to ceaselessly redefine themselves as “existential start-ups” for which “every moment of life” must tend to transform itself “into a specific form of performative and productive labor-power” (Nicoli & Paltrinieri, 2017, p. 108). In this way, something similar to a capitalist bio-programming takes shape, which aims to redesign the body and mind of the subject in such a way that “not only his professionalism, but also his imagination, his creativity, his adaptive capacity, his active involvement and even his desire are continuously called into question and implicated in order to make the processes which govern the accumulation of value more efficient and

29. For a further exploration, cfr. Chicchi & Leonardi, 2016.

30. Cfr. also Bourdieu, 1998, p. 45.

fluid” (Chicchi & Simone, 2017, p. 68). Meanwhile, and increasingly, every activity deriving from bios tends to be put to work and to produce profit in networking activities, which—according to logics of exploitation and subsumption typical to “bio-cognitive capitalism”—are immediately transformed into the free productive labor of big data: the new oil of the infamous GAFAM.<sup>31</sup> These, in the words of Marco D’Eramo, constitute a new capitalist aristocracy capable of escaping the fiscal sovereignty of States. In order to ingratiate themselves with their favors, in fact, they reconfigure themselves as corporate-States “suitable to Corporations”, according to a logic already intuited by Deleuze and Guattari for which “the State has never lost so much power to put itself so strongly in the service of economic power” (D’Eramo, 2021, p. 105)<sup>32</sup>.

### **Crisis of the Neoliberal Program, Misadventure of the Self-Entrepreneur, and Pandemic Capitalism**

It is a difficult question: in Europe today, what about the neoliberal program and the processes of subjectivation to which it has given shape? A completely satisfactory answer is certainly premature. A correct approach, however, requires focusing on the fact that the neoliberal program has run aground against the iceberg of the crisis which began in 2007–2008. The crisis quickly spread by contagion from the US to Europe, where the gigantic private debt accumulated by capitalist actors was converted into public debt through the prompt assistance of States and central banks. Thus from 2010–2011, the blockade of capitalist accumulation in Europe took the form of a sovereign debt crisis during which a new penitential morality which blamed European populations entered the scene.<sup>33</sup> The religion of debt (in fact operative since the 1980s and institutionalized by the Maastricht Treaty) put an end to the carnivalistic effervescence of previous decades<sup>34</sup>. From the carnival to Lent (Pezzella, 2013a, pp. 12-15), with the Fiscal Compact and European Mechanism of Stability, the neoliberal program has exacerbated the austerity axioms which were already present in the Maastricht Treaty: the result is reestablished well by the punitive inflexibility with which the so-called Troika intervened in the “Greek laboratory” (Stavrakakis, 2014; Varoufakis, 2018).

31. Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft. On bio-cognitive capitalism, cfr. the contributions in AA. VV., 2019; AA.VV., 2020; Fumagalli, 2017; Fumagalli, 2020.

32. Cf. Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p. 300, cited by D’Eramo.

33. For a further examination of this theme, cfr. Simoncini, 2018, pp. 202-220 and 244-253.

34. For a stimulating theoretical approach to the theme of debt, cfr. Pezzella, 2013b, pp. 168ff.

Meanwhile, the obscene side of the neoliberal subject strongly emerged on the terrain of processes of subjectivation. The playful and performative image the entrepreneur has of himself darkened and gradually allowed the much darker and mournful image of the indebted man to emerge, who was now forced to deal with austerity (Lazzarato, 2013). But the indebted man was the same man who in earlier decades was manufactured by neoliberal governments in order to guarantee the aggregate demand without which no capitalism is possible. In the “roaring 1990s”, in fact, behind the promise of happiness and enjoyment—an enjoyment which should have followed the increase in consumption—this systemic necessity pushed everyone into debt (Stiglitz, 2003). If in the previous cycle demand had been procured by the conjunction between the Welfare State and the rigidity of labor (and wages), neoliberal capitalism had taken the form of a paradoxical “financial and privatized Keynesianism”: in order to support the demand that it had aimed at, i.e., the indebtedness of business and families, generating a genuine “real subsumption of labor to finance” through “the subordinate inclusion of families to the financial dimension of capital” (Bellofiore, Garibaldi, and Mortágua, 2019, pp. 22-23). In other words, through their indebtedness in loans and mortgages but also through their massive investment in securities, investment funds, pension funds, and other financial products. In this way, neoliberalism had made an “engine of growth” out of consumption which provided the final outlet for Japanese, German, and Chinese exports and gradually became a “rather dynamic capitalist configuration, capable of producing consensus and hegemony” (Bellofiore, Garibaldi, and Mortágua, 2019, p. 24). In short, from the very beginning neoliberalism was “the factory of the indebted man” (Lazzarato, 2012).

After the 2008 crisis, when this socio-economic assemblage had come to an end, the collapse of the neoliberal program—which stubbornly presented itself as the only solution to the crisis that it had caused—was prevented only by the governing bodies of the Central European Bank. By means of Quantitative Easing and the decision to buy large shares of public debt securities and indebted States (stabilizing their interest rates), the CEB created a large mass of immaterial money. The void of economic policy on the international scale was thus filled only by the activism of central bankers: the monetary policies of the CEB were “the only real antidote put in place to stem the crisis” (Bertorello & Marazzi, 2016)<sup>35</sup>. It was the financial sphere alone, however, that enjoyed it. The net effect of this central bank governance was therefore the growth of the “wealth

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35. The same is true of the policies of the Federal Reserve and the Bank of Japan, to name only the most prominent examples.

of the rich without any contribution to the general increase on incomes” (Bertorello & Marazzi, 2016).

In this way, inequality widened. The middle and subaltern classes were drastically impoverished. The conditions of possibility for a new age of mass resentment were thus generated: the “new populisms” expressed politically by Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro, Salvini, and others (Revelli, 2019, p. 5-84). On the terrain of the processes of subjectivation, meanwhile, the indebted man was converted into the populist subject, showing a new obscene side of the neoliberal subject that – under the blows of the crisis – conigned himself impoverished, insecure, and resentful to the so-called sovereignisms, “asking for protection, borders, security, identity confirmations, records of nation, race, and sex” (Dominijanni, 2020, p. 32). Neoliberal biopolitics thus showed its necropolitical face (Mbembe, 2016).

But the so called “populist moment”<sup>36</sup> did not at all represent the rupture of the neoliberal plot, because it did not question its foundations. Instead, it represented its product, and at the same time, its reversal: a reversal in which the neoliberal subject expressly showed its angry face. The fear of falling indeed pushed him to secure his “stuff” and defend it from alleged enemies, who were identified in turn as the financial elites, technocrats of the European Union, or the “invading” migrants. As Ida Dominijanni has clearly shown, if in the years of dissipation, consumer credit and the pleasure-seeking ethics of the neoliberal subject rode the advantages of neoliberal capitalism “armed with self-entrepreneurial ethics and the principle of performance”, today—in the austere and secure season inaugurated by the crisis—it rebelled with all its force against the “risk of becoming a forgotten of globalization” (2020, p. 32). And, very sensitive to the sirens of those who had promised sure redemption, he turned into the populist subject who wants to feel himself as a master in his own home.

With the 2020 pandemic, after decades of cuts in social spending which have decimated national health systems, producing levels of poverty and inequality capable of undermining the social stability of individual European States, the neoliberal program has shown all of its inability to guarantee an order based on the social security of citizens and the elementary right to life<sup>37</sup>. Thus the stability pact needed to be suspended,

36. Cfr. Mouffe, 2018.

37. Cfr. Ferrajoli, 2021, pp. 271-277. During the pandemic, all of the lines of fracture which cross the corporate order have sharpened and inequality has reached new heights. In a recent Oxfam report, for example, one can be read that “the increase recorded of the assets of the 10 richest billionaires in the world since the beginning of the crisis would be more than enough to prevent all the inhabitants of the Earth from falling into poverty due to the virus, as well as to ensure the anti-Covid-19 vaccine for all” (2021).

allowing States to further put themselves into debt in order not to sink into the abyss and to confront the state of emergency<sup>38</sup>. The regulatory framework that prevented state aid to companies in distress and which provided for the initiation of an infringement procedure for unfair competition was then modified. Moreover, the monetary bazooka of the CEB has been reloaded and further enhanced with PEPP (recently increased by 500 billion euros): the Pandemic Emergency Purchase Program that keeps the spread, and consequently interest on securities, low: government bonds that will be massively purchased on the secondary market by the CEB until the end of March 2022 (Ciccarelli, 2020)<sup>39</sup>. At the same time, the central government of the European Union tried to transform the pandemic into the occasion for “consolidating itself as a center of transnational political direction capable of giving shape to long-term economic and social processes” (Connessioni precarie, 2020). With a view to a capitalist stabilization of the crisis and a relaunching of the EU as a great competitive space within globalization, the Recovery Fund, which partially modifies the European neoliberal program, was launched. It recovers “elements of planning, rejected for decades as the antithesis to market freedom”, in order to finance and structure public spending around well-defined objectives: ecological transition, digital transition, innovation and competitiveness of industry 4.0, and resilience and social sustainability in the face of crises and catastrophes.

The concept of the plan implied by the Recovery Plan, however, does not coincide with that for which a public subject plans in order to achieve social goals and protect common goods. On the contrary, the great expectations of success by the Recovery Fund presuppose an idea of the plan founded primarily on the ability to make private individuals participate in investment operations. At the heart of the Recovery Plan, in other words, are the needs of companies’ profitability and the reasons of the market, always understood as the first regulator of the social system and the main principle for verifying the practices of government. Emphasizing its “neoliberal aspiration”, Alessandro Somma has observed, for example, that with regard to the so-called ecological transition the Recovery Fund does not question the market as a source of environmental problems but “aims to make their solution into an opportunity for profit obviously supported by a massive use of public money” (2021, p. 209). From the perspective of an effective and rapid internal restructuring of European capitalism, the public power involved in this kind of plan seems once again “to govern for the market, rather than ...

38. Perhaps better put, the safeguard clauses that provided for the infringement procedure in the event of excessive spending by individual States were deactivated by the Stability Pact.

39. The secondary market is that in which the securities already in circulation can be traded until their maturity and are in the portfolios of banks, investment funds, and other actors of the financial market.

because of the market” (Foucault, 2008b, p. 121). Italy could once again be a laboratory for this new form of neoliberal governmentality. Its new government is in fact made up of “two governments in one” (Barontini, 2021): the first coincides with a cabinet of technocrats who control the key ministries and is directed by the Prime Minister in the position of a commissioner: a commissioner to whom the media provide the “fascinating imaginary envelope ... of the sparkling and irresistible power of financial mechanics”, thus making him a new “star” of the society of the spectacle (Pezzella, 2011); the second government, composed according to partitioning logics, is instead delegated to fulfill support tasks and provide the necessary democratic-parliamentary legitimacy. With the important novelty that, within it, both the standard bearers of neoliberal Europeanism and conservative sovereigntism are present, united by the “productivity cult of business” and the practice of a “market populism” that has become common sense in the neoliberal era (Cingari, 2021a, p. 3; Cingari, 2021b)<sup>40</sup>. It is certainly too early to say, but the impression is that in Italy we are faced with an innovative variant of those processes of execution that for decades produced something similar to an “apocalypse of democracy”: a slow apocalypse in the course of which, step by step, the oligarchic root of representative democracy is openly revealed<sup>41</sup>.

By combining the different souls of real neoliberalism, including neo-populist neoliberalism, the post-democratic Italian government—whose program is “entirely hinged on European directives”—seems to want to make the state of emergency “the opportunity for a new order”: the opportunity through which not only Italy but also Europe itself can emerge from the crisis by “somehow reconverting the economic-political philosophy on which it was born and raised” (Dominijanni, 2021). In other words, the pandemic makes it possible to set up a laboratory in which to experiment with the renewal of neoliberalism through a “vast program of the reform of European capitalism: a program that sees the great energy reconversion at its center” (Bascetta, 2021). Thus the government reconfigures itself as a mere “operation center” designed to test the “long-term transformations” in order to achieve global competitiveness in the absence (or near absence) of social conflict: temporarily bracketing the “German cult of the balanced budget” and the “dogma that all public debt was irredeemably ‘bad’”, it comes to admit “the existence of a ‘good’ debt” (Bascetta, 2021)<sup>42</sup>. In the Italian experiment, that debt seems necessary to support the rationale of a market Darwinism that,

40. The category of market population was coined in Franck, 2000 and taken up in Bauman, 2007, pp. 35-51.

41. For a further examination, cfr. Simoncini, 2018, pp. 54-62.

42. Mario Draghi has tested this distinction with his monetary policies.

in accordance with the neoliberal reason of the world, considers it “a mistake to protect all economic activities indifferently” because “resources ... are always scarce” (Draghi, 2021)<sup>43</sup>. It is therefore necessary to let the most competitive companies of the technologically advanced sectors—which can be assisted with the “good debt”—live, and let the uncompetitive ones die: the “zombie business” destined to perish in future competition<sup>44</sup>. If resources are scarce, the State can only use them in order to “promote human capital in the best possible way”: a warning term that the Italian experiment remains firmly within the neoliberal ideological perimeter (Draghi, 2020). The Italian laboratory does not seem to propose an ecologically and technologically updated Keynesianism, but something much more similar to a “Schumpeterian creative destruction in a neoliberal sauce” (Brancaccio & Realfonzo, 2021; Marazzi, 2021). However, this market Darwinism risks soon overturning into a social Darwinism and producing hundreds of thousands of newly unemployed people, some of whom will be flexibly reabsorbed by companies equipped to compete in the fourth industrial revolution. The workers expelled from production processes will then again be forced to accept precarious jobs and mini-wages, according to the well-tested logic of neoliberal Workfare.

In the crisis and in pandemic capitalism, confirming the assumption that “social inclusion coincides with inclusion in the market” and its competitive order, neoliberalism tests the new variants of its program (Somma, 2021, p. 210): a program in which—as we have said—the purse strings of public spending are reopened out of necessity, even if in a much smaller proportion than the singers of the magnificent and progressive fortunes of the Recovery Fund believe<sup>45</sup>. Beyond the proportions of the funds, however, the decisive point is that the purse strings do not seem to reopen for “returning to the old and dear social rights”, since the dominant hypothesis in the governmental centers of the EU seems to be resuming the neoliberal program which was suspended after the end of

43. The warning about the scarcity of resources also seems to allude to the restoration of the Stability Pact at the end of the pandemic emergency.

44. On the distinction between a “good debt” – one destined for “investments in human capital, infrastructure crucial for production, research, and other uses” and “bad debt” – used “for non-productive purposes”, cfr. Draghi, 2020.

45. Emiliano Brancaccio and Riccardo Realfonzo have argued that the resources will be modest. In fact, the two economists recall, of the 209 billion euros that the Recovery Plan will allocate for Italy over the next six years, “127 are loans that only provide a savings on the spread between national and European interest rates: ... no more than 4 billion a year”. For the remaining 82 billion euros in grants, “the net amount will depend on Italy’s contribution to the European budget. Considering that an agreement on European taxes appears unlikely, member countries will have to contribute in relation to the national GDP as usual, which implies that Italy should pay no less than 40 billion. The net European subsidy is thus only 42 billion, or 7 billion per year”. But “in the next session, Italy will contribute about 20 billion to the remaining part of the EU budget”, and therefore “the total net transfer drops to less than 4 billion per year”. In short, according to Brancaccio and Realfonzo, in total “Italy will receive much less than 10 billion a year from Europe for the next six years: a modest sum compared to a crisis that destroyed over 160 billion of GDP last year alone, much more than past recessions” (2021). In confirmation of this thesis, cfr. Marazzi, 2021 and Fumagalli, 2020.

the emergency (reactivating the austerity parameters of the Fiscal Compact), but more likely in order to establish a “survival welfare, differential and rewarding, which replaces the wage with temporary subsidies and reproduces and strengthens/reinforces existing hierarchies” (Brancaccio & Realfonzo, 2021)<sup>46</sup>. In short, the Recovery Fund could only constitute an “exception” which boils down to “confirming the neoliberal ‘rule’ on which the European Union is based” (Montalbano, 2020)<sup>47</sup>.

As Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval have observed, with the Recovery Fund we are faced with the “mutualization of a very small part of the debt of Europeans” and we are therefore “far from pooling together all of the debt of the States” (Dardot & Laval, 2020). Given the persistence of the constraints imposed by the Treaties, then, it is certainly not possible *hic et nunc* to think “the transfer of a part of public expenditure from the national to the European scale” (Dardot & Laval, 2020). This would in fact require States to delegate much wider sovereignty than those permitted until now on the basis of an inter-State logic founded on “an understanding between nation-States through the intermediation of their representatives”. But it is precisely that logic that inspired the construction of the EU from the outset and keeps “the foundations of State sovereignty” intact, a sovereignty only attenuated by the growing role of the European Council (Dardot & Laval, 2020).

However, within the Recovery Fund there is an interesting novelty: a mutualization of debt that, despite all the limits highlighted by Dardot and Laval, allows us to glimpse—in addition to the possibility of its monetization—the constitution of a true common European debt and a common budget. The immediately following step would be a common fiscal policy. And, dreaming a bit further, through highly imposed progressive tax this policy could finance in the future a new continental Welfare State that restarts from common needs, or from the need for common solidarity; and that is centered on healthy, sociality, environment, training, research, culture, basic income (Bellofiore,

46. On this theme, cfr. also Mezzadra & Raparelli, 2020.

47. The conditions contained in the Regulation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility approved by the European Parliament on February 9<sup>th</sup> last year, for example, seem to call for this: a Regulation that will govern 672 of the next 750 billion of the Next Generation EU and which, according to the Financial Times, “sink their teeth” into the Recovery Fund. Indeed, Article 10, paragraph 1 ensures that the disbursement of funds may be interrupted in the event of an excessive deficit and these imbalances remain the parameters of the Stability and Growth Pact: 60% debt/GDP and 3% deficit. As Matteo Bor-tonoloni emphasizes, whoever does not respect them will have to “adopt a ‘credible’ plan to achieve them”. Who decides this credibility, in the last instance, is the European Commission, and it may suspend the disbursement of funds “not only in the event of non-compliant implementation regarding what is written in the famous ‘Recovery Plan’ for which they were granted, but also in the event of non-compliance of the orientation of public finance as a whole with the requirements of the Commission” itself. In other words, the teeth of the Recovery Fund can translate “for the weaker countries into substantial austerity” and for the subordinate classes into “further precarity and weakening” (2021).

2020)<sup>48</sup>: a European Welfare, in other words, capable of adequately addressing the environmental issue and the new social issue, giving shape to a European society of care that removes the lives of most people from the dogma of competition and definitively closes the check with neoliberal biopolitics (Euronomade, 2020b; Euronomade, 2020a; Bersani, 2020)<sup>49</sup>. And that, at the same time, reopens the challenge against what Walter Benjamin called “capitalism as religion” a century ago (2013)<sup>50</sup>.

Of course, this “dangerously minimum margin” contained in the Recovery Fund, a margin that appears “at the instant of danger when a small crack seems to open” (Marramao, 2009, p. 247), does not even exist without the construction of a transnational political movement and continental processes of political subjectivation capable of wedging in this opening and challenging the neoliberal program within its own crisis. It is quite difficult to think, as Euro-optimistic neo-Keynesian economists do, that the suspension of the stability pact will be spontaneously followed by the affirmation of a new post-pandemic Welfare<sup>51</sup>. It is more likely that we will see no revenge by Keynes against Hayek (or Rüstow) without the conflict promoted by a European social movement. Such a movement, however, could only arise if the suspended subject that took shape in pandemic capitalism found the strength to cross its own time by resuming the path of conflict along the lines of class, gender, and race which hierarchize European citizenship. Soon that subject will have to face, much more than it has done so thus far, the harsh consequences of the economic crisis induced by the pandemic. Everything will then be to see if at that juncture it will be able to take, in new forms, the path of what—speaking of the European revolutions of the 1830s and 1840s—Michel Foucault called “conversion to revolution” (Foucault, 2001b, p. 200)<sup>52</sup>.

48. Here I would distance myself from authors such as Alessandro Somma who, while providing important tools for the critique of the material constitution of the European Union, consider it sterile to reflect on the activation of conflicting practices on a continental scale.

49. For an interesting theoretical attempt to think the cure on the basis of the presupposition that it cannot, for itself, “constitute the foundation of a politics”, cfr. Butler, 2020, pp. 247-272 and Serughetti, 2020.

50. Relaunching Benjamin’s ideas, a century later Marco D’Eramo reads neoliberalism as a mode of governing that made capitalism and the free market “a genuine faith with its missionaries, apostles, temples (banks), mega-churches (the ‘too big to fail’ mega-banks).” And further, with human capital as “a modern equivalent of the soul” (D’Eramo, 2021, p. 218).

51. For a position of this type, cfr. the still interesting Saraceno, 2020.

52. Cfr. Foucault, 2009, pp. 180-183. On this point cfr. Borrelli, 2019.

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