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As the Earth Falls into the Sun: Marx, Foucault, and the Problem of Destruction

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In the paper, we start from Marx's and Foucault's apocalyptic proclamations about destruction. Refusing the somewhat reasonable temptation to understand these statements as merely rhetorical devices (in Marx's case) or a theoretical dead-end of biopolitics (in Foucault's case), we inquire into the problem of destruction in Marx's and Foucault's work. Regardless of the irregular and somewhat marginal uses, these need to be situated within the specific context of Marx and Foucault's work and both their emphasis on the productiveness of capital (Marx) and power (Foucault), respectively, and the subsequent under-theorization of their destructive movements. Only by doing this, one can propose another basis for their co-reading in the age of climate catastrophe.

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> "Capital [...] in its actual movement is affected by the prospect of humanity's coming ruin and unstoppable depopulation just as much or as little as by the possibility that the earth will fall into the sun."
>
> Marx 2024, 239–40

1. Introduction

We seemingly no longer live in a world of "small" or "localized" catastrophes, however relative these terms might be understood. Countries soon to be underwater, heat waves melting roads and bending rail tracks, burning rainforests, fires ripping through Arctic boreal forests and tundra are becoming normal everyday occurrences. Our milieu is being destroyed, but for now, life persists. All this takes place in the context in which destruction seems no longer to be a force of violence of a clearly identifiable agent—be it God's wrath, seduction by the Devil, or even as an effect of geopolitical fight over access to resources. In the quote above, Karl Marx hints at something different, and not only in scale. Notice the adjective "coming;" it is as if Marx collapses the temporality itself by dragging the future into the present, by making capital accumulation a movement not only always-already destructive, but even more, apocalyptic. This and many other of Marx's proclamations should not be understood as simple rhetorical devices or an echo of the historical context in which they were written.[1] His entire opus opens up the problematic of capital as a form of power over life and its conditions of possibility, as well as the dialectical reversal of its ability to produce the conditions for life into something else—what Wendy Brown in the introduction to the new translation of *Capital* calls its "unprecedented order of production and destruction [...] an order [...] at once world building and world eviscerating" (Brown 2024, xvi).

While life, in all of its polysemic nature, might be more than ever at the center of political activity, what is less obvious is that behind this focus is the need to "foster," "augment," or "protect" life, be it the life of other species or even human life. This idea of the primacy of biological life for politics was, of course, the central proposition of Michel Foucault's concept of biopower. For Foucault, biopower was a form of power "dealing with living beings and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them [...] at the level of life itself" (Foucault 1978, 143). Not unlike Marx, Foucault himself was attentive to how the productiveness of power—for Marx it was the productiveness of accumulation—transforms into its radical opposite; biopower can "disallow it (i.e., life)

[1] See the otherwise admirable work by Stedman Jones (2018).

to the point of death" (Foucault 1978, 138). Furthermore, Foucault moved away from "disallowing life" which manifests itself as the retrieval of power and its life preserving effects, the abandonment of life to the conditions not susceptible to its prolongation, to a more active forms of "distribution" of death: "Wars were never as bloody as they have been since the 19th century," he continues, "and never before did regimes visit such holocausts on their own population" (Foucault 1978, 137). The infamous birth of biopolitics was therefore immediately followed by the birth of an unnamed twin, one evoking a new capacity for collective destruction unparalleled in the history of humanity and far more destructive than even the most powerful of sovereigns could ever dream of. Only just finished with the introduction of a new paradigm of power's inherent productivity, Foucault is seemingly negating his own invention and was quick to admit the possibility for the protection of life turning into its opposite, a "formidable power of death" (Foucault 1978, 137).

As we will see, not unlike accumulation for Marx, this apparently limitless productivity returns as an infinite destructive potential; faced with the fact of multiple instances of murder and genocide in the age of biopower, Foucault goes so far to claim that these acts of radical violence and destruction of human life present an "irresolvable contradiction" within/of his own hypothesis of a new form of productive power. This "irreversible contradiction" is more than a mere theoretical dead-end, as one can seemingly find its rationale behind the dynamics driving the problem of climate catastrophe, from the problem of emissions to the proposed geoengineering solutions.[2] One can also identify its logic as the driving force behind the last decade's trend of greenwashing the weapons industry or the attempts to produce "environmentally friendly weapons." Behind the US Department of Defense sequestering the development of the "greener explosives and rocket fuels," to the British Aerospace (BAE) push to make more "environmental" and "collateral-friendly" weaponry, experimenting with "lead free bullets" that "cause no further harm," "bang-free bomb [...] re-engineered so the risk to the user of exposure to the bomb's fumes is reduced," and "the explosives that eventually turn into manure" thereby regenerating "the environment that they had initially destroyed," there is the Foucauldian problematic of how murder and destruction operate in the age of biopower.[3]

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[2] Among others, the work of Andreas Malm (2012) points to the same contradiction from the Marxist perspective.

[3] The attempts of BAE were, in the end, abandoned due to the high costs of development. See: "BAE goes big on 'green' weapons," *BBC*, October 26, 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6081486.stm; Bob Carlson and Daneil Grushkin, "The Military's Push to Green Our Explosives," *Slate*, Jan 19, 2012. https://slate.com/technology/2012/01/synthetic-biology-environmentally-friendly-weapons-and-the-biological-and-toxin-weapons-convention.html.

A significant amount of reading Marx with Foucault has been undertaken in the last couple of decades, from Jacques Bidet (2016) to Toni Negri (2017), to name only some of the most prominent. This body of work was indispensable in our understanding of the transformation of politics and economy, as it approached Marx and Foucault as authors that can mutually provide each other with the conceptual tools to understand both the transformation of capital accumulation as well as different forms of subjectivities emerging in the period usually described as neoliberal or financial capitalism. The attempt at a critique or a mere synthesis of this body of work is far beyond the scope of this article. More important, as the conditions that underpinned these readings have transformed, so does our reading of Marx and Foucault; we propose to start from the problematic of destruction. Avoiding another synthesis, this is an "inoperative" reading (Agamben) that does not exhaust itself in a single interpretation but presents itself as an obstacle to one. By inoperativity (*inoperosità*) Agamben understands the "capacity to deactivate something and render it inoperative [...] without simply destroying it, but liberating the potentials that have remained inactive in it to allow a different use of them" (Agamben 2015, 273). This approach owes much to Étienne Balibar's proposal for "disjunctive synthesis" of Marx and Foucault (Balibar 2014), preferring it either to the usual subsumption of one to the other, or to a construction of a symbiotic structure of "foucauldian-marxism," which would repeat or merely displace the theoretical problems of freudo-marxism (Balibar 1992). This reading strategy aims to preserve dynamism and the tension between the two works, opting for a dialogue from which different concepts and themes may emerge that do not aim to relinquish their internal heterogeneity. These theoretical encounters between Marx and Foucault will from now on take place amidst the Holocene extinction (i.e., the sixth mass extinction) and in what the environmental historian Stephen J. Pyne a decade ago proclaimed as "the Pyrocene" age (Pyne 2015). As the non-linear nature of these processes continues to dramatically unfold, it will alter the nature of these readings as well as the politics emanating from them. Furthermore, we also deal with *oeuvres* which are seemingly both incompatible (Balibar 1992), while at the same time, as Razmig Keucheyan argues, due to the different traditions of Marxism which had developed and with which Foucault had engaged in different discussions, as well as multiple attempts at synthesis, "we can no longer speak of Marx and Foucault without starting from what took place in between Marx and Foucault" (Keucheyan 2016). To return to the problem of destruction, from Marx's position, one could easily dismiss the conceptualization of destruction as an "idealist" abstraction—an order of unexamined reflection of lived experience in late capitalism and the ongoing climate catastrophe—and as such, the conceptual investigation revolving around this

process would likely more obfuscate than provide any explanations. On the other hand, from a Foucauldian position, destruction might seem a non-issue, or a mere effect of sovereigns' capacity, an aspect of its "murderous splendor" (Foucault 1978, 144). And yet the problem itself keeps insisting on and returning, irregularly, but in seemingly crucial places for both, while their very treatment of the topic at times seems to go against the very nature of their philosophical projects.

The aim of this paper is certainly not to try to resolve Foucault's "irresolvable contradiction," or Marx's "living contradiction," but to return to their work to identify specific moments to be used in alternative mutual readings. While destruction is not altogether absent from contemporary "critical theory," for a long time it was certainly not one amongst its central themes. There are exceptions to this rule: Günther Anders, Étienne Balibar, Judith Butler, and Achille Mbembe are amongst notable ones.[4] If Foucault's legacy is usually subsumed by the idea of "productiveness of power," and Marx by the idea of the productivity of capital, what could the force of destruction mean from their perspectives?

2. Nazis, nuclear annihilation, and laboratory-bred killer viruses: Foucault on destruction

Destruction is a rare occurrence in the work of the "philosopher of power"—a title Foucault forcefully refused (Foucault 1996a)—revolving around the capacity and effects of power to produce, incite, and transform different objects, be it bodies, habits, populations, subjectivities, and potentially even objects (Lemke 2021). There are a couple of sightings in some minor texts and interviews—for example, identifying destruction as a force preceding the production of subjectivities and a criterion that differentiates this process of production of subjectivities from the production of use values: "I don't agree with those who would assume that this production of man by man occurs like the production of value, the production of economically useful objects; it's the destruction of what we are as well as the creation of a completely different thing" (Foucault 2000, 275). It forms the silent, concept-less background of classical works such as *Discipline and Punish* or *Madness and Civilization*, which does not merit its own specific logic of explanation; its status is reduced to that of a mere prelude to something new, "the creation of a completely different thing." To put it another way, the Foucauldian problematic of destruction when subjectivation is in question is, in equal measure, both impossible and superfluous, since the

[4] The last couple of decades have provided us with dramatic and important theoretical interventions from the post-colonial and feminist thinkers and writers. All these will be ignored as our focus in this paper is predominantly Marx and Foucault.

act of destruction of "old" forms of subjectivities is at the same time the process of production of new forms and is perceptible exclusively through this process and its end result.

There is another, far more notable occurrence of destruction in Foucault's oeuvre; this time it is not the destruction of subjectivities in question but rather of populations. In the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures (*SMBD*), Foucault developed biopolitics as a form of power which grasps men as "multiplicity" and a "biological fact", "taking control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species and of ensuring that they are [...] regularized" (Foucault 2003, 246-7). From the very outset biopolitics approached death as "something permanent" that "gnaws at life," though it nonetheless continually attempts its "disqualification," as it aims to "maximize and extract forces" (Foucault 2003, 244) from population and individuals. But if to achieve this its basic function is to "improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances, to avoid accidents" (Foucault 2003, 254), how can it then continue to "call for death, to demand deaths, to give order to kill?" (Foucault 2003, 254).

Foucault's answer to this problem is racism, although understood in a specific way. Racism introduces a "break in the biological continuum of human races" between "what must live and what must die" (Foucault 2003, 255). This relationship between races is not that of security or war, or for that matter one of exploitation, but a distinctly "biological" relation between one's life and the Other's death: killing or any form of "indirect murder" is "acceptable only if it results [...] in the elimination of the biological threat to and the *improvement* of the species or race" (Foucault 2003, 256). For Foucault, this is a continuous problem for contemporary politics: "How can one both make a bio-power function and exercise the rights of war, the rights of murder and the function of death, without becoming racist?" (Foucault 2003, 263). One answer to this question is that this concept of racism, as Warren Montag had argued, does not even require the concept of race as such; it should be understood as an apparatus that continually *biologizes* populations, i.e., it redefines different forms of relations (religious, geopolitical, economic etc.) between populations in terms of (biological) survival (Montag 2002). This would go a long way in helping us understand the virulent reactions of contemporary societies to the phenomena of migration. Yet this interpretation goes against Foucault's own insistence on a specific understanding of biology in this context. Furthermore, by moving away from the context that gave birth to Nazi racism and antisemitism on which Foucault models his biopolitical racism, in the global context of the loss of "futurability" (Berardi 2019) and under the pressure emanating on milieu from the climate catastrophe any sort of eugenic program Foucault claims to be an essential part of racist practice folds

upon itself into the more immediate and short-term imperative of *survival* first and foremost. If we were to extrapolate current lack of coordinated global action into the future, especially the continuous refusal of any attempt at decarbonizing the economies of developed countries, a coming climate breakdown might open up a specific form of destruction and "letting die," a type of war of inaction in which for you to live "the other must die, but you yourself do not have to be the one who takes that other's life" (Butler 2021, 110). As we move from the proposition that the Other "must die" to that he "may die", is "free" to die, we move from the *irreverence* of the life of the Other to its *irrelevance*. Though the prospect and effects might be similar and effects are what counts, these are different strategies—from sovereign murder to the biopolitical *laissez faire* destruction: "The overarching model for [Foucault's] biopolitics or governmentality, in fact, is not the live body. It is the free market. Biopolitics is an economism before it is a biologism" (Levinson 2010, 247).

There is another problem with Foucault's "irresolvable contradiction." As he proclaimed the birth of biopolitics as the "threshold of modernity" (Foucault 1978, 143), Foucault seemingly relegated all other non-productive forms of power, such as sovereignty with its subtractive capacity, to be non-modern. And yet the contemporary world is still full of murder: "wholesale slaughters" and "massacres" are playing out, while political regimes visit "holocausts on their own populations" (Foucault 1978, 137). In the process of extrapolating the concept of biopower, he thus stumbles upon a paradox that is "difficult, if not impossible to get around" (Foucault 2003, 253). This paradox between "letting die" and killing, "letting live" and "protecting life" for Foucault was exemplified by nuclear power and the possibility of nuclear war:

> The power to manufacture and use the atom bomb represents the deployment of a sovereign power that kills, but it is also the power to kill life itself. So, the power that is being exercised in this atomic power is exercised in such a way that it is capable of suppressing itself. And, therefore, to suppress itself insofar as it is the power that guarantees life. Either it is sovereign and uses the atom bomb, and therefore cannot be power, biopower, or the power to guarantee life, as it has been ever since the nineteenth century. Or, at the opposite extreme, you no longer have a sovereign right that is in excess of biopower, but a biopower that is in excess of sovereign right (Foucault 2003, 253–4).

We are here beyond the "productive" character of the destruction of subjectivities, which opens up the possibility for another creation. While forming his famous proposition of biopolitics, Foucault seemingly acknowledges an altogether different form

of destruction, which differs not only in its object—population and not subjectivity—but also in scale and in *quality*.[5] In *SMBD*, he moved abruptly from the proposition of "letting die" to more 'direct' ways of ending life. In an attempt to provide a concept of power defined by its productive capacities, in a 180-degree turn, Foucault almost seems to end up arguing that it is its multiple ways of ending life that are its defining feature as much as its life-preserving aim and techniques. In the long run, the birth of biopolitics will end up almost being overshadowed by the birth of an unnamed twin—what Achille Mbembe (2003) will call necropolitics, among many other names used—forming a set of problems which instigated another whole discourse of biopolitical studies. Foucault's admittance of an "impossible" paradox opened his discourse on biopower to a set of different lines of questioning: In what ways can the sovereign demand death in the context of power that "guarantees" or "protects" life? Does sovereignty continue in its old murderous ways, or is it irrevocably changed and transformed by the emergence of biopower? What is the relation between these two forms of power?

Foucault moves from the proposition of "letting die"— by way of transforming the milieu of the living—to less "indirect" ways of ending the lives of populations and even life itself. Nuclear weapons, one of the gravest existential threats humankind has ever faced ("the power to kill life itself") for Foucault are primarily an epistemic problem since, in his own admission, they question the distinction between biopower that nurtures and sovereignty that kills. There is a glaring and perhaps telling omission here by Foucault. Though being developed in parallel, it was the use of an A-bomb that preceded the first nuclear power plant, not the other way around, as he implicitly posits—the understanding by which Nuclear Armageddon would be the extreme inversion of the potential of nuclear power to secure the abundance of energy needed to preserve life and aid the development of its potential. But, what seems even more striking in this move is not only that this paradox is heuristically introduced as a problem of definitions, but that he comes up with the most extreme modes of destruction of life that are overwhelming, total, and a complete reversal of powers' ability to "protect" life: "genocides," "holocausts," and "nuclear war." In *SMBD*, he even indulges in a bit of sci-fi.

> [T]he excess of biopower [...] appears when it [...] becomes technologically and politically possible for man not only to manage life but to make it proliferate, to create living matter [...] and ultimately, to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive (Foucault 2003, 254).

[5] We would like to thank the reviewer for pointing out that Foucault introduces the analysis of power as governmentality precisely because population and subjectivity, or *omnes et singulatim*, are inseparable. And yet, as Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson argue, there is theorethical relevance of stressing both the question of articulation and the friction and tension between these two forms of power. See Mezzadra and Neilson (2013).

This mix of different and unnamed historical moments and potential events as well as those which at the time of writing were merely a possibility, have little in common apart from the fact that they are juxtaposed to the productiveness of power and its life affirming potential (its ability to "manage" life, make it "proliferate" and to "create living matter"). It is also important to notice that, when speaking about power, Foucault is precise. Unlike domination, with which it is often conflated, power is defined not by the radical asymmetry of force but by freedom of action as its precondition. In his treatment of slavery as an example of relation of power which is completely "out of balance," with one side claiming "'total power' over the other," Foucault argues that power can be exercised to the extent that there is still some possibility of resistance: in this specific and extreme case, the slave is either "killing himself, of leaping out of the window or of killing the other person" (Foucault 1996b, 441). Foucault opposes destruction to power not due to its violence, however extreme it might be, but as its outside, that which threatens power, while at the same time being its logical precondition and one of its possible effects.[6] The "infinite contradiction" he identifies in relation to the necessity of biopolitical destruction is dependent not only on his process of development of productive power *vis-a-vis* sovereignty as its opposite—which unlike discipline or biopower is defined by the operation of deduction or *prélèvement* (Foucault 1978, 136)—but also on the somewhat idealist view whereby sovereignty is *replaced* by biopolitics as a dominant form of power.

This analytic move from power as a productive force to "universally destructive" events leaves unthought and unthinkable all those "in-between" phenomena, not as spectacular as the all-out nuclear war or the global pandemic of deadly laboratory bred virus, that go down all to the level of what Lazzarato and Alliez call the acts of "daily destruction" (2018, 355) resulting from our everyday mundane (over) consumption with incredible and fast accumulating societal and planetary costs. The problem of destruction and its logic takes an altogether different meaning in the context of climate change and its potential to destroy not only human life, but also, in the most extreme outcome, the ultimate reversal of protection of life into its complete annihilation—the Hothouse Earth scenario and the destruction of (complex) life itself (Steffen, Rockström, Richardson et al. 2018). What drives Foucault to these conclusions is the apparent totality of destruction, which creates no further conditions for anything; it is not a revelation of history, but a mere contingency without a context. He is drawn into the apparent possibilities of destruction in its "murderous splendor" (Foucault 1978, 144).

[6] Here, our interpretation differs from that of Johanna Oksala (2014), for whom the decisive difference in later Foucault is not between power and destruction, but power and violence.

And yet not all destructive capacity is defined by the "murderous splendor"; the visibility of destruction and violence is not only characteristic of sovereign power, exemplified by the spectacle of the scaffolding, but it forms its essential aspect, without which sovereignty would not be able to operate. While sovereignty is both theatrical and spectacular, the specificity of contemporary power according to Foucault is that it operates not only discreetly, but also not directly on the object, not on some*thing*, but rather on the arrangements of things in a supporting environment defined as milieu. These interventions are what he called security.

> The specific space of security refers then to a series of possible events; it refers to the temporal and the uncertain, which have to be inserted within a given space. The space in which a series of uncertain elements unfold is, I think, roughly what one can call the milieu [...]. It is therefore the medium of an action and the element in which it circulates [...]. The apparatuses of security work, fabricate, organize, and plan a milieu even before the notion was formed and isolated [...]. The milieu is a set of natural givens – rivers, marshes, hills – and a set of artificial givens – an agglomeration of individuals, of houses, etcetera. The milieu is a certain number of combined, overall effects bearing on all who live in it [...]. What one tries to reach through this milieu is precisely the conjunction of a series of events produced by these individuals, populations, and groups, and quasi-natural events which occur around them. (Foucault 2007, 20–21)

Though Foucault hadn't planned it to be any kind of a hermeneutical key for our understanding of the present, it seems that the biopolitical drive had taken, at least for a certain time, hold in a part of the weapons industry and its attempts to create weapons that specifically distinguish between the object of destruction *and* its supporting milieu. This was the project of the *greening* of the arms industry, for whom destruction is never total but an opportunity to act on the milieu, to create different conditions for different life. Understood in this way, contemporary forms of destruction are not a simple form of sovereign "power to kill" but "to kill life itself," an inverse of security. Foucault thus approaches destruction as either an effect of a sovereign intervention, the excess of biopolitics, or a mere precondition for the production of subjectivity, but there is no distinction regarding the object of destruction. Excluding viruses—although even the last global pandemic, that of COVID-19, can also be thought of as a crisis of milieu—most of the examples Foucault uses are interventions into the conditions of the *possibility* of Life. "Horrorism" (Cavarero 2008) of the atomic bomb is not only due to its majestic explosion and immediate destruction, but rather to its grim aftermath; the specificity of Holocaust is not only in the logic of its massacres and the technological

approach to murder, but in the way in which the milieu of *Konzentrationslager* was created to evacuate life or a desire for one.

The "*quasi*-natural events" Foucault speaks about form both the destructive forces and those of forces of transcendence, paradoxically leading political analysis away from the milieu. Foucault's introduction of destruction *tout court* articulates a milieu evacuated of political actions and relations. His explanation of the milieu, on the other hand, makes the argument about the "*quasi*-natural events" as immanence of destruction; as that which operates in a given milieu. We have today, a political concern about the future of human action on the global environment and a technological optimism about new opportunities. Processes of securitization as the creation and management of the elements of the milieu; the question is how and by which mechanisms are the edges of the milieu being disintegrated.

3. Violence and destruction in Marx's *Capital*

Marx's accounts of capitalism's inception are destructive and violent: famously, it comes into being "with blood and dirt oozing from every pore" (Marx 2024, 689–90). With regards to the future, in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels prophesied that if no communist revolution would occur, capitalism—in at least one of the potential outcomes—would end in the "mutual destruction of the competing classes." Marx seemingly banished capital's most excessive acts against human life to its prehistory or to its future.[7] *Manifesto* sidelines the focus on the destructive potential of capitalist accumulation in favor of its profoundly revolutionary and transformative character. Capital's dynamism is seemingly elevated as its most defining feature; since capital accumulation has no end-goals and occurs on a progressively ever higher level, the acts of destruction against humanity and nature, which are the precondition for production and ultimately accumulation, will become both more extensive *and* intensive with time. According to *the Manifesto*, this destruction is instrumental to a specific mode of production based on mass commodity production and is thus not for-itself but forms a part of a movement of and a function of capital accumulation. One aspect of this dynamism is captured by Joseph Schumpeter's concept of "creative destruction," which succinctly distills what Marx saw as "the violent destruction of capital not by relations external to it, but rather as a condition of its self-preservation" (Marx 1993, 750). And yet, what the signifier late capitalism stands for—among many other variations—is the obscure yet present feeling that the dynamic between what Marx called accumulation's "dual

[7] In the 1847 text "Wage Labour and Capital," he famously writes of capital as "a master once distinguished and barbarous as it drags with it into its grave the corpses of its slaves." Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/ch09.htm.

character," i.e. its development of "productive forces" and "forces producing repression" (Marx 2024, 591, n.20), is not only non-sustainable but apocalyptic and that the historical march of the "accumulation of the catastrophic" is nearing its end.

While Marx transformed his understanding of capitalism in the decades following the *Manifesto*, this characterization of accumulation as a dynamic process including destruction as its precondition and effect, remained constant. In Marx's later works, especially *Capital*, the destructive capacity of capital accumulation takes different forms and logics: from so-called primitive accumulation's destruction of pre-capitalist "forms of life" (communities, customs, modes of production, subjectivities etc.); cyclically recurring destruction of goods and money during economic downturns; a long run tendency of the rate of profit to fall, with all of its counter-tendencies, the combination of which open up the prospect of a more extreme exploitation of labor and other different destructive consequences; and the potentially apocalyptic outcome of ever increasing accumulation for the environment, nature and humanity itself—the prospect of which occupied Marx at the end of his life (Saito 2017).

Thus, the first logic of capitalism's destruction is defined by violence as a phenomenological manifestation of destruction as a means to an end, or as a "condition of capital's self-preservation" (Marx 1993, 750). The almost natural point of departure for understanding this logic of destruction is the original accumulation, not only because it inaugurates capital and its specific mode of production, but since to achieve this it requires that "the private property based on a person's own labor be destroyed—in other words, that the workers be expropriated" (Marx 2024, 701). Foucault himself held the position that this expropriation of labor necessitates the destruction of pre-capitalist forms of life and subjectivities.[8] There is a long debate within Marxism on the role of the so-called primitive or original accumulation in Marx's theory, whether it should be understood merely as a "prehistory" of capital or a contemporary form of accumulation.[9] Sandro Mezzadra sums up the stakes of this discussion as being not only about historical capitalism but also about the way contemporary capitalism operates.

> The concepts of "norm" and "exception" not only need to be applied to the relationship between the *origin, history, and present* of the capitalist mode of production, but they work to critically deconstruct the very image of "normal" capitalism—if necessary, "beyond Marx." (Mezzadra 2011, 307).

[8] His work in the 1970s could be seen as a genealogy of subjectivity emanating from the process of original accumulation (Foucault 2012). See also: Oksala 2023.

[9] The new English edition of *Capital* reflects these long debates by choosing to translate the original German "ursprüngliche" as "original" rather than "primitive" to avoid the tendency to understand it as a mere historical one-off event. See: Marx 2024, 836–7, n.i.

This tendency to view the inaugural violence of capitalist relations as exceptional is tied to Marx's idea of "mute compulsion" of the contractual relation between what are seemingly equal and free parties (Mau 2023). But it is only seemingly a bloodless accumulation; even if we date a primordial destruction to primitive accumulation as a historical sequence, fully developed capitalism is defined by destruction *beyond* violent coercion of the political appropriation of surplus.

One may conclude that Marx ascribes an inherently biopolitical trajectory to the historical process of accumulation of capital (Mau 2023). In part V, chapter 14 of *Capital*, "The Production of Absolute and Relative Surplus Value," Marx seems to start his argument from the opposite premise, namely that "Capital doesn't think about whether the bearers of labor power die young or old. Only one thing interests capital: the maximum amount of labor-power that can be activated in a workday. It achieves this goal by shortening the lives of labor-power's bearers" (Marx 2024, 236). In the production of "absolute surplus-value" capital can be accumulated on a higher scale only by continuously extending the working day and thereby extracting more of the surplus value from the "time of life" of workers, thereby not only affecting a "deterioration of human labor-power by robbing it of its normal moral and physical conditions of development and activity", but also producing "the premature exhaustion and death of the bearers of labor-power itself" (Marx 2024, 236). This general deterioration of the life of the worker and the horizon of its destruction thus became the background for the transformation of accumulation.

> What experience trends to show the capitalist is that there is chronic overpopulation: i.e., at any given moment the population exceeds what capital requires for its valorization, although the source of this excess is generations of worn-out, rapidly replaced people who die young [...] even if capitalist production began just yesterday [...] it has quickly and firmly grabbed the nation's vital forces by their very roots [...] the only thing slowing the degeneration of urban workers is the fresher elements from the country continuously being absorbed by the urban population. Yet despite the healthy rural air that these workers once took in and the principle of natural selection that reigns among them, letting only the strongest individuals survive, the intelligent observer sees that they, too, have already begun to die off (Marx 2024, 239).

As the above quote forms the background of the human toll of accumulation via absolute surplus production, Marx seems to describe the necessity of politics of life inherent to capital accumulation and the centrality of labor in that process of accumulation. Apparently, there is a certain life-preserving mechanism inherent to the law of value itself, which puts in motion the shift towards the production of relative surplus value.

Since the extraction of relative surplus value as a *strategy*—rationality devoid of design but with intentionality—of accumulation can only be achieved against the biopolitical background dedicated to the preservation of the life of the population. For Marx, this shift in the strategy of accumulation of surplus value brought about the politics of the preservation of life.

> When capitalist production [...] extends the working day, it doesn't merely rob human labor-power of normal conditions, both moral and physical, in which to develop and function, thereby causing labor-power to deteriorate: it also produces the premature exhaustion and death of the bearers of labor-power. Capitalist production extends the amount of time a worker works in a given period by shortening their life. [...] When workers break down faster, they have to be replaced more often. The cost that arises from their deterioration, and therefore the cost of reproducing labor-power increases [...]. So a normal working day would seem to be in the capital's own interest (Marx 2024, 236).

The predominant interpretation of Marx's proposition transforms this shift in accumulation strategy into a one-way street of capitalism's inherent evolution, driven by a telos that brings about the reversal of irrationality of capitalist accumulation into governmental rationality. But the dispositif of the politics of life were not brought about by capital as it "takes no account of the well-being and mortality rates of its workers only when society forces it to do so" (Marx 2024, 240). Pressured by organized workers' demands, as well as by its need to self-reproduce, capital ends up minimally preserving the life of workers by shifting to exploitation based not any more on the continuous extension of the working day (thereby "shortening his (i.e., workers') life") but on increasing productivity of labor. From Marx's perspective, biopolitics as a form of power optimizing, sustaining, and protecting the biological existence of bearers of "labor power" is therefore not a precondition for the accumulation of capital or the expression of the inherent rationality of accumulation.[10] Rather, it is its effect, a resulting specific strategy of capital responding to obstacles put in front of accumulation, a compromise-formation which is neither necessary, universalizable, nor irreversible. This has a profound consequence not only for our understanding of accumulation but also for our understanding of biopolitics as a historical formation. It leads us to the

[10] According to Foucault, the process of accumulation of men and capital are mutually reinforcing and conditioning: "the accumulation of men and the accumulation of capital [...] cannot be separated; it would not be possible to solve the problem of the accumulation of men without the growth of an apparatus of production capable of both sustaining them and using them; conversely, the techniques that made the cumulative multiplicity of men useful accelerated the accumulation of capital" (Foucault, 1995, 220–1).

refusal of the implicit perspective by which it forms a historical sequence to the age of sovereignty (something Foucault at least implies, not to speak of those authors such as Agamben or Esposito, who view the transformation of forms of power into biopolitics as an internal movement of the political, a view Foucault himself seems to reject). The understanding by which biopolitics is an outcome of forces and counterforces resolves Foucault's "irresolvable contradiction" by proclaiming it a non-issue from the very start: destruction would cease to be understood as a form of arcane privilege, as biopolitics would cease to represent an "age" (i.e. the age of biopolitics), but a form of power operating side by side with other forms of power.

The preservation of the life of the bearers of labor-power is not extended to slave labor, as the owners of slave labor are driven by the "maxim of slave management" according to which "the most effective economy is that which takes out of the human chattel in the shortest space of time the utmost amount of exertion it is capable of putting forth," leading in places like Cuba and West Indies, to the "absolute destruction of a portion of its numbers every year" (Marx 2024, 237). Overexploitation is the phenomenon defined by overproduction and intensification of extraction, and, according to Balibar, presents an important challenge to Marx's analysis in *Capital* (Balibar 2013). Just as in the case of the original accumulation—linked to overexploitation by way of the seemingly extrinsic character of the violence and cruelty which is a part of phenomena— overexploitation is not a mere historical fact nor a historical leftover from previous modes of production. On the contrary, as Balibar argues, capitalism's defining feature is a tendency towards the "*normalization of overexploitation*" (Balibar 2013), but in a specific way of the "mute compulsion" as

> capitalism *interiorizes the political conditions* to the economic process itself: its "material" basis, the collective labor force with a "value" corresponding to necessary labor, is never a physical or natural element, but a social and cultural factor determined by class struggles, in a conflictual manner (Balibar 2013).

This interiorization should not be understood as the process whereby capital homogenizes the labor and thus levels of exploitation across the world. These conditions are constantly (re)produced and differ radically, forming what we discussed as a biologization of populations, i.e., an incessant (re)production of race and sexuality.

This process of normalization of industrial productive labor presents Marx with numerous problems, and his development of both under- and overexploitation attests to this (Balibar 2013). The need for overexploitation is accompanied by the phenomena of underexploitation, by the production of non-labor, non-working "surplus

population." In the chapter entitled "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation," Marx addresses the problem of non-work and population beyond work, and differentiates between three types of relative surplus population: the first two, the "floating" and the "latent," are tied to either the cyclical nature of capitalist industry or to the specific needs of its particular branches, and can at all times be "called upon the capital." Our interest here is in the third type, what Marx calls "the stagnant" relative surplus population. While Marx still defines it in relation to work (and usually that of "maximum of working time and a minimum of wages"), its "lowest sediment," i.e. paupers, are defined by their *irrelevance* to accumulation, as they do not produce surplus value. Among paupers there are those "willing to work" and orphans, as well as "agricultural laborers," but also the "victims of industry," those unable to work, chiefly people who succumb to their incapacity for adaptation "who lived beyond the workers' normal life expectancy" (Marx 2024, 589). Unlike the transition from the production of absolute to that of relative surplus value, which brings to effect different attempts to protect life itself, beyond the factory capital operates less by overtaking life and its process and more by abandoning it, transferring these "*faux fais* (incidental expense) [...] that capital manages to largely maneuver onto the backs of working class and petit bourgeoisie" (Marx 2024, 589). For Marx, the condition of pauperism is defined by something akin to "the mass reproduction of animals," as the "combined number of births and deaths (is) inversely proportional to wages and thus the amount of subsistence that various kinds of workers have at their disposal" (Marx 2024, 588). The violence of mass unemployment is a specifically capitalist form of violence, the one in which whole populations teeter on the abyss of destruction, which seems to occur in the absence of the form of domination characteristic of factory work. "Surplus population of workers" is both an effect of capitalist accumulation and its precondition, "its lever," as it "belongs to capital absolutely—just as much as it would if capital had bred it at its own expense" (Marx 2024, 578).

But behind this cyclical nature of industrial activity, its "periodicity," however destructive it might be, there is another truly necropolitical drive Marx attaches to capitalism which finds its expression in the "absolute general law of capitalist accumulation." As he states, "the population of workers that produces the accumulation of capital thereby also produces, in progressively larger amounts, the means by which their own relative superfluity is brought about" (Marx 2024, 577). The change in the composition of capital, especially the rise of its "organic" form, in time requires fewer and fewer workers. Thus, "the greater society's wealth, the greater the functioning capital, the extent and energy of that capital's growth, and thus also the absolute size of the working population and labor's productive power, the larger the surplus population

or industrial reserve army will be" (Marx 2024, 589). With greater reserve army the greater is "the mass of a consolidated surplus population," and as he famously puts it "the accumulation of wealth at one side of the capital relation is simultaneously the accumulation of misery, tortuous labor, slavery, ignorance, brutality and moral degradation at the opposite side" (Marx 2024, 591). Thus, the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation poses a necropolitical tendency, either by exploitation or lack of thereof, as "the overwork performed by the employed members of the working class swells the rank of the reserve army, while, competition from the latter group exerts pressure on the former one, forcing it to do overwork and comply with all of capital demands" (Marx 2024, 582).

While this seems to be merely a latent possibility in Marx work, as it seems to move against his principal idea that "the movement of capital thus has no limits" (Marx 2024, 126), one can easily identify certain tendencies within the present which makes this projection far less unlikely; everything from financial capitalism, through imperialism, especially in the context of climate catastrophes and the unequal geographical distribution of its effects. On account of the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation, Fredric Jameson goes against Balibar to claim that *Capital* "is a book about unemployment: its conceptual climax is reached with this proposition that industrial capitalism generates an overwhelming mass of potentially uninvestable capital on one hand, and an ever-increasing mass of unemployed people on the other" (Jameson 2010, 10).

Beyond capital's capacity to destroy "creatively," Marx also writes about movements of destruction seemingly *beyond* the dialectical reversal, not only of the destruction of communal life in the original accumulation or of the destruction of human beings in the productive process of industrial production itself. Here we translate this absolute general law to an apocalyptic long-run tendency of accumulation to destroy "whole populations"—or, as Marx puts it: "Capital [...] in its actual movement is affected by the prospect of humanity's coming ruin and unstoppable depopulation just as much or as little as by the possibility that the earth will fall into the sun" (Marx 2024, 240).[11] This apocalyptic perspective is present almost from the very beginning of Marx's work, but for Marx the destruction of human life—be it partial or potentially total—enters the picture almost always either at capitalism's beginnings or in its future, a latter move which amounts to what Benjamin Noys calls "Marx's method of the tendency" (2010). Other forms of destruction constitutive of this apocalyptic tendency of accumulation are the effect of the "systematic collect-

[11] Our understanding of this is that the constant self-expansion of capital equals its total indifference to everything but self-expansion—even its very conditions of possibility.

ive exploitation of the earth" (Marx 2024, 691), usually experienced on a seemingly miniature scale of the banality of daily destruction of overconsumption.

From the perspective of *circulation* of capital, even more than from its production, capitalism is at odds with life; accumulation—the paradigm of which is the financial circuit, M-M', which does not employ work or does not "pass through" commodities—becomes detached from protection of life and the body of the workers while it, nonetheless, continues to affect them. Besides the functional role that financial capitalism played in the inauguration of the capitalist mode of production, its ties to war and colonial expansion,[12] Marx hints here at something else. The move from the C-M-C to M(C)-M', the one which for Marx was ultimately not completely possible—since for him industrial capital subjugates interest-bearing capital, becoming only its particular form—betrays a fundamental fantasy of capitalism: "self-valorization" beyond bodies that produce and self-emancipation from the dependence on human physiology and needs of bearers of labor power, a fantasy of breaking free from the confines and inertia of human biology. While the human body as the bearer of labor-power is seemingly the source of value and therefore accumulation, *Capital* depicts bodies in the process of being constantly broken down by this process of production, workers as the appendage to the machines and their rhythm. Human physiology thus becomes a mere hindrance to capital's "headless drive" (Marx 2024, 236): "The drive to appropriate labor during all twenty-four hours of the day is in fact inherent in capitalist production. But it is physically impossible to exploit the same bearers of labor-power all day and all night" (Marx 2024, 227–8) until "there is a muscle, a sinew or a drop of blood left to extract profit from" (Marx 2024, 272). Marx's formula M-M', or "money's circulation as capital is an end in itself, because the valorization of value exists only within this constantly restarted movement" (Marx 2024, 126), stands in for the becoming metaphysical of capital, its tendency to decouple from the living labor and even commodities (i.e. material wealth) that it produces. This is the ultimate manifestation of capital's destructiveness—its indifference towards the living and their milieu.

6. Concluding remarks

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault points out how capitalism's eschatology was defined by crisis and catastrophe from its very beginnings. Even when many of the countervailing forces to the accumulation were weak or entirely non-existent, David Ricardo and Adam Smith imbued the discourse of political economy with the fantasy of an almost

[12] While the connection between financial capital and colonial expansion and war is only implicit in Marx's work, it was further developed early by Lenin, Hilferding, and Luxemburg. For some of notable contemporary works on the subject see: Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long 20th Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (Verso, 1994); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (Verso, 2005); Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy* (Harvard UP, 2014).

inevitable prospect of its failure, as an effect of the "finitude of human existence (in relation to scarcity and labour) and the fulfilment of an end to History – whether in the form of an indefinite deceleration or in that of a radical reversal" (Foucault 2002, 285). From Foucault's position, we could argue that even the original prophets were themselves unaware of the productive capacities of capitalism, something which, according to Foucault, eluded to a certain degree even Marx himself.

This dominant form of power, characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, represents a historical difference, but more importantly, an ontological one. For Foucault—just as for Marx—capitalist power is distinct as it does not operate by subtracting but by *multiplying*, be it commodities, money, power, or the potential of bodies. But what this kind of approach excludes are alternative forms of accumulation to that of "the production of relative surplus value," for example, those defined by colonization and the so-called primitive accumulation. This is the way Foucault's objection that there is no "Capitalism" (*le capitalisme*) defined by "the single necessary logic" (*le logique capitalisme*) and "its eternal laws" (Foucault 2008, 164) should be understood. This necessitates moving away from the question of an *inherent* politics of life of capital—i.e., *the* politics of life, correlating to *the* capital accumulation—to the question of multiple strategies and effects of accumulation on the lives of populations, animal species, and milieu(s) in general. This necessitates not just taking into account the drive behind capital accumulation but thinking through the multiple historical strategies of accumulation resulting in and in return being a result of different emerging counter-powers forming against it.

While these positions might seem self-evident to an extent, this extent is our very focus, especially since our present circumstances, of which many seem to revolve around the perspective of the incoming climate catastrophe, i.e., the destruction of our milieu (understood as an assemblage of ecology and infrastructure), take the form of a theological event. These starting points seem to be necessary to grasp a tendency by which the corridor of biopower's grasp on life will become ever narrower, stuck between the injunction to accumulate ("This is *Moses and the Prophets*!") and the coming climate chaos, whose effects itself are ever more destabilizing and will keep on reducing the capacity of the milieu to be supportive of contemporary societies. The capitalism of Marx and Foucault is not the force of homogenization, but the one that re-arranges the world by producing different populations, territories, milieus as a byproduct of its operation.

What is our popular imaginary of destruction? The disaster movie genre is centered on the incomprehensibility of the event: the sweeping tsunami, tornado, falling comet, or man-made world-shattering device. This view centers on the representation of the

impossible; the moment of rapture. The event imagined would be so singular that it would erase not just the bodies, land, and the skies, but also the possibility of any critique whatsoever; this event thus forms an impossibility, an unthought and unthinkable. Our aim in reading Foucault and Marx through destruction is not only due to their insights, which are far from exhausted in this text, but also due to the way they attempted to grasp destruction analytically and their different failures to do so: it ended up forming the outside of their discourse, its background, a concept-less presence structuring the conditions of their work. The ultimate inability to conceptualize destruction is represented in their apocalyptic visions of destruction *tout cour*t as the negation of all possible relations, a lack of any potential difference. Going against most predominant readings of Marx and Foucault, we aimed to show the points at which the revitalization of their thought could be undertaken from the perspective of destruction as part of our present and not as an end-of-the-world event. Their contribution to understanding destruction should be read as the negation of negation; it is not intended to serve a politico-theological argument of destruction, i.e., destruction as an endpoint from which we can read the movement of history. Their contributions, regardless of the differences and the dead-ends, seem to oppose this very idea, enabling us to grasp the ways in which destruction is abstracted from politics as an end of history. This relates to the question whether destruction is but a prelude to something productive (Foucault), or productive in-itself (Marx): following Foucault, the category through which one should understand capital's destruction is not that of intention but relation.

Thus, analysis of destruction should follow the Foucauldian path of inquiry about the *how* of power, as it involves "where and how, between whom, between what points, according to what processes and with what effects" (Foucault 2007, 2). Foucault's reasoning challenges us to rethink something like destruction, understood as the effect of the focused stream of power directed toward something. The answer is "the move towards (the analysis of) real forces" (Foucault 2007, 3). What if power functions in a way that relations are more important than positions, in which contexts are more important than meaning? In which struggle is clearer than morality? This reasoning should be applied to destruction itself. Not destruction as an aftermath of violence, or as a precursor to production, but destruction as it is.

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