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Saving ‘Population’ From Governmentality Studies: Translating Between Archaeology and Biopolitics

Jon Solomon

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The term “biopolitics” leads one to expect, minimally, a field of intervention that gives equal weight to life and politics, a field that is concerned with the modern process of the “speciation of the human” and the “recruiting of species life into the strategization of power relations” (Dillon 2004, 81). Yet in the lectures given in 1978-79 at the Collège de France by Michel Foucault under the course title of “The Birth of Biopolitics”—the only course that actually bears the title of “biopolitics”, the central concern was not life per se, but the critique of political liberalism and political economy undertaken through the innovative concept of governmentality. Does this mean that governmentality constitutes the essential problem of biopolitics, or did Foucault’s overwhelming interest in governmentality constitute an instance of what Foucault calls the “detours of my work” (Foucault 1985, 7)?

The rising prominence within anglophone academic publishing markets of “governmentality studies” has resulted in a growing number of works that either lose sight altogether of the biopolitical, or else misrepresent the object of biopower—population—by ignoring its essential hybridity. As the field where human speciation takes place, ‘population’ denotes the complex

relation between the plasticity of the individual body and the mutability of a species. Yet when 'population' happens to be located outside the conventional boundaries of 'the West', the result, as seen in *Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics* (Greenhalgh & Winkler, 2005), is an ironic confirmation of the legitimacy of both the sovereign power that the Foucaultian concept of biopower was supposed to correct and the speciation of the human, born out of colonialism and primitive accumulation, that biopower in its global dimensions takes as its object.

Given that so many of the ideas introduced by French philosopher Michel Foucault—biopolitics, governmentality, the archaeological critique of historicism—are so important to helping us wrest the common away from the privatizing trends of the contemporary global hegemony, it has become something of a pressing issue to undertake a thorough critique of their latent eurocentrism at a methodological level. This critique must advance along two lines of approach. The first of these would proceed (Solomon 2010) by a focus on the distribution of the heterogeneous between experience and knowledge in the construction of modern geocultural regions. The second axis, which constitutes the line of inquiry adopted by the present essay, would remedy the culturalism inherent in governmentality studies by appealing to the archaeological method developed in *The Order of Things* (1966), which emphasized the interrelatedness of language, life and labor. Conversely, the culturalist limits of the archaeological method can be fruitfully remedied by a biopolitical perspective that brings language and biology back into the concern with fluid techniques of urban population control known as "governmentality". These two lines of inquiry are part of a project to elaborate what I call a biopolitics of translation (Sakai and Solomon, 2005; Solomon, 2008; Solomon 2009a; Solomon 2009b; Solomon 2010a; Solomon 2010b).

Governmentality and biopolitics

Governmentality first appears in the lecture series at the Collège de France on February 1, 1978—barely two years after launching, on January 21, 1976, an outline of a new form of non-sovereign, non-disciplinary power—biopower—that would lead to an understanding of the “‘biopolitics’ of the human species” (Foucault 2003, 243; translation modified). Since biopolitics is largely concerned with the emergence of population as a new object of knowledge that mediates and politicizes the relations among the biologically-inflected concepts of bodies, species, and milieu, it is easy to understand the reasons why a corollary concept of governmental practices was necessary. The rationalities and technologies based on the model of truth-claims developed in the natural sciences effectively serve to transform, optimize and intervene in the development of populations as a whole. Governmentality thus names a specific field of intervention into the political that takes as its target the life of a group (as opposed to what Foucault calls “disciplinary power”, which takes as its target the body of an individual and control over a territory and its produce). But what about the relation between the singular and the plural: a body and a species, a population and many populations, a niche and an environment? Foucault was undoubtedly aware of Canguilhem’s assertion that the notion of ‘milieu’ (the term used in French for environment) in the social world had been directly imported from the biological sciences (Foucault 2007, 27). Seen from this perspective, the category of biopolitics would obviously have to extend beyond the problems of governmentality conceived as regulatory power to the problems of social speciation, the fact that the “State...is obliged to use race...to exercise its sovereign power” (Foucault 2003, 258). In a line that echoes the now-famous dictum concerning the “entry of life into history” that defines the concept of biopolitics, Foucault speaks, with regard to population, of “the entry of a ‘nature’ into the field of techniques of power” (Foucault 2007, 75). “The population is therefore everything that extends from biological rootedness through the species up to the surface that gives one a hold provided by the public” (Foucault 2007, 75). This much is evident when Foucault first identifies what he calls the “population series” composed of “biological processes—regulatory

mechanisms—State” (Foucault 2003, 250). The question is how this series then relates to the one he gives on Jan. 25, 1978, in the course from the following year: “security—population—government” (Foucault 2007, 78). Although the relation between biological processes and State/regulatory mechanisms would have to be, in terms of this series, logically integral, it is equally clear that the disappearance of biological processes (and linguistic processes) from the ensuing discussion of governmentality leaves us unable to fully comprehend the speciation of the human. Nevertheless, a version of governmentality without speciation becomes so central to that part of his research made public in the lectures at the Collège de France that by the time Foucault begins a course devoted in name to biopolitics per se (“The Birth of Biopolitics”), the political problem of body-species-milieu has virtually disappeared.

Perhaps the centrality of security, political economy, and government(ality) should be ascribed to nothing more than contingency. Foucault’s lectures, as he stressed at the beginning of the 1976 course “Society Must Be Defended”, were not finished works but rather a record or report upon results of on-going research. As *The History of Sexuality* project was planned to culminate in a sixth and final volume entitled “Populations and Races”, it is clear that Foucault did not intend for the attention given to the State and regulatory mechanisms in the work on governmentality to draw attention away from the biological and the problem of speciation. Compared to understanding the way in which specific technologies affect the subject “where body and population meet” (Foucault 2003, 252), the focus on the rationalities and technologies of urban economic life is but a regional part of the problem. Although the displacement of territory by governmentality makes sense in terms of introducing “flexibility” and “security” (or what Deleuze subsequently identified as “control”) into the analysis of power after discipline and sovereignty, the result is a tendency to reify the connection between population and region. Nothing exemplifies this tendency more than the constant references

throughout Foucault's lectures to a social formation known as "the West" that is never subjected to either genealogical or archaeological scrutiny. Yet since biopower intervenes at the point where assemblages of body, species, and milieu are to be differentiated, one would have expected it to be the realm in which hybrid objects of study dominate.

What are we to make of this contingent "detour" amidst the conspicuous absence of hybrid social objects? A footnote in Deleuze's study of Foucault reminds his readers that "Foucault never considered himself competent enough to deal with Oriental formations" (Deleuze 1986, 114; my translation). Deleuze could not deny, however, that Foucault could not avoid mentioning the Orient. It is precisely this strategy of bracketing that enables Foucault to assert the 'absolute uniqueness' of the form taken by pastoral power in the West (Foucault 2007, 148). Similar sweeping generalizations about the Oriental difference that are scattered throughout Foucault's published works and public statements persuade us that Deleuze's characterization of Foucault's ambivalence in the face of the Orient is in fact a missed opportunity to problematize the role of the specialist in speciation. What may seem like the height of modesty on the part of Foucault-the-non-specialist takes on a much more ironic tone when one considers the fact that he was also the century's most ardent critic of discipline. "[S]election [through "disqualification"], normalization, hierarchicalization, and centralization" are the four moments that characterize the biopolitical intervention of the State into the formation of knowledge through the institutional nexus of the University (Foucault 2003, 180-183). Competence undoubtedly falls under the purview of such disciplinary measures. To view Foucault's flirtations with the Orient in terms of a lack of competence would be tantamount to negating the entire premise of Foucault's work on power since the disciplinary society: Power does not repress so much as construct and create! Hence, the link between specialization and speciation is integral and as such must be problematized in terms of the norms that enable and justify knowledgeable indifference or avoidance. Deleuze might well

have consulted Foucault's advice concerning the definition of a 'discursive practice': "it must not be confused...with the 'competence' of a speaking subject when he constructs grammatical sentences" (Foucault 1995, 117). I understand this to mean that the critique of the 'West', a subject that gathers itself in discourse, must not overlook the non-specialist's reliance upon the grammar of translation-as-exchange (Mezzadra 2007). If the problem of biopolitics is primarily an investigation of the nature of the species-being that mediates between body and environment, then discontinuities and differentiation within the human species cannot be normatively assumed through either disciplinary measures such as competence nor regulatory measures that correspond to geopolitical divisions of language, population and territory.

Archaeology and biopolitics

What concerns me here are neither the arguments about authorial intention that would betray Foucault's understanding of subjectivity as an effect of power nor the debates about periodization in the life of an author that serve the interests of monumentalization (against which Foucault militated, Cf. Foucault 1995, 7) and the bureaucratic institutions that manage it. I am interested, rather, in the relation between concepts and how that relationality describes or interdicts a set of problems. I share, in other words, one of the concerns central to the archaeological method developed earlier in Foucault's career: that of understanding how the relation between statements can often tell us much more about the conditions of knowledge than the actual concepts or objects which those statements describe. I am interested, in other words, in the "fundamental distinction between the acceptability and the predication of truth" (Han 2002, 84). As I think about why Foucault narrowed his interest in biopolitics to a critique of liberalism through the category of governmentality, I cannot help but feel that it was on account of reasons having to do as much with the acceptability as with the predicability of truth. 'Culturalism' deserves our attention not just because it is one such reason that continues to enjoy persuasive status in terms of both acceptability and predicability, but also because it

forms a nexus between experience and knowledge, disciplinary power and biopower, archaeology and biopolitics.

Archaeology can assist our understanding of biopolitics. One of the principal arguments of *The Order of Things* is that political economy forms, together with biology and philology, the essential epistemic structure of the modern. One does not have to argue that governmentality has no relation to biopolitics (indeed, it does) to point out that Foucault, by turning the discussion of biopolitics to a critique of liberalism while leaving both biology and language largely out of the picture, left the door open to misleading his audience away from the “whateverness” (Deleuze 1986, 79) or indeterminate quality of population upon which biopower intervenes.

Foucault’s archaeological method is important for biopolitical critique because of its refusal of the historicist tropes of origin, influence, and dissemination. Those familiar with debates in a post/colonial context will immediately recognize the radical displacement of culture and history—in short, the national subject—that the Foucaultian critique operates. Under the archaeological method, assumptions that would lose validity include many of the standard ones that structure the entire field of inquiry about the non-West: the ‘Western’ origins of modernity, the exteriority of the ‘non-West’ to the ‘West’, the “alternative modernities” specific to non-Western culture, the influence of the ‘West’ upon derivative forms of indigenous culture, and the continuity or substratum of indigenous cultural forms. Under the archaeological method, discontinuity, indeterminacy, and hybridity become the operative mode of culture in general.

One can easily see that, for the transnational cognitive bureaucracy that manages postcolonial relations between the ‘West’ and the ‘non-West’ according to the theme of cultural difference

and the methodological presuppositions of origin, influence, and exteriority, the archaeological methodology poses a challenge that must be neutralized. Perhaps the easiest way to disqualify Foucault's relevance for a critique of social speciation on both sides of the bifurcation between imperial and colonial formations would be to simply contain his work within the conventional boundaries of the 'West'. For this reason, the internalist methodology deployed by his great study of the anthropological assumptions behind the modern *episteme* has always seemed to me as deeply troubling for a critique of the culturalism represented by eurocentrism as it is necessary to an understanding of how experience is distributed according to various disciplines of knowledge that take the speciation of the human as a given. The extent to which recurring terms like "our modernity", "our culture", and "Western culture" constitute an integral part of the archaeology of the *human* sciences is never thrown into question, yet the notion of archaeology itself as method has its birth in the citation of the fictitious Chinese encyclopedia from Borges. "[T]he stark impossibility of thinking *that*", as Foucault writes in the conclusion to the opening paragraph of *The Order of Things*, signals to readers that the problem of "words and things" centers on the indecidability of indication and signification. Foucault's reliance upon the deictic, "that"¹, to underline the scandalous spectacle of exteriority ironically hides from view the oscillation between the transcendental and the empirical that is at the heart of the historical conditions of possibility and the modalities of epistemological constitution that define the equivocality of modern Man as *ours* and *Western* yet still quasi-transcendental in the constitution of knowledge.

Hence I do not think we can accept at face value Foucault's assertion that "my aim is most decidedly not to use the categories of cultural totalities" (Foucault 1995, 15). I understand that there are precise methodological reasons—the discontinuity central to the archaeological method being the most salient one—for which Foucault regards the modern *episteme* as "the strict unfolding of Western culture in accordance with the necessity it imposed upon itself at

the beginning of the nineteenth century” (Foucault 2002, 419). Discontinuity provides both a template for countering the phenomenological presuppositions of historical experience—seen in the concepts of development, evolution, tradition and influence (Foucault 1995, 21-26)—and a way of relating processes of the visible and the discursive that are mutually integrated yet distinct. Yet the concluding description of *The Order of Things* as, “a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area—European culture since the sixteenth century” (Foucault 2002, 421), reinstates the deictic move with which the text began. In spite of the aura of modesty that a “restricted” object of study apparently inspires among specialists, it cannot conceal the fact that ‘bordering’ is a fundamental mode in the operation of biopower. As Gayatri Spivak has famously written in reference to Foucault: “I am suggesting...that to buy a self-contained version of the West is to ignore its production by the imperialist project” (Spivak 1988, 291). In spite of the many methodological precautions taken in *The Order of Things* to avert this closure, the constitution of the ‘West’ brings to mind with no small irony one of the questions posed at the beginning of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: “We must ask what purpose is served by this suspension of all the accepted unities, if, in the end, we return to the unities we pretended to question at the outset.” (Foucault 1995, 28). The solution to this problem is to be found in a biopolitical translation of archaeology that divests the latter of its culturalist presuppositions.

Literature and biopolitics

Preoccupied by a fascinating “detour” into governmentality, Foucault devoted scant consideration to the apparatus of language in his elaboration of biopolitics². Yet, if the attempt to engineer society along the lines of biological knowledge is intrinsic to the project of modernity, it follows that we will need a critical category capable of comprehending the anthropological divisions modeled upon species difference that have been inherited from colonialism. Biopolitics offers the promise of a break with eurocentrism without a recuperation

of its assumptions about experience and knowledge through the assertion of cultural otherness. Precisely because the study of the human species is inseparable from the colonial encounter that brought about the single world and with it the possibility of anthropological knowledge in general, the cultural divisions institutionalized by the human and social sciences as well as the geopolitical divisions of the world system must be interrogated for their complicity with the biopower that takes the classification of species-being as its object. For this reason, the relation between biopolitics and eurocentrism cannot be reduced to a question of historical archives the answer to which would lie in the introduction of objects of experience culled from colonized social formations that had been previously excluded by research, such as Foucault's, exclusively centered on Europe (Cf. Stoler 1995). To flesh out the concept of biopolitics would require not just a new bureaucratic apparatus for managing non-European archives but also an archaeology of culture in its modern form. It is my hypothesis that when the series of language-community-specialized knowledge is related to the eruption of the biological and medical sciences, what begins to emerge is an historical narrative about technologies and rationalities designed to intervene in the 'transitions' between the plasticity of the individual body (seen for instance in neurobiology), the mutability of a species (seen for example in evolutionary biology), the plurality of each and the environment in which they co-exist. Just as colonialism cannot be understood without reference to what Mezzadra calls the "transitions" to Capitalism that are incessantly repeated throughout its frenetic development (Mezzadra 2007), so it must also be understood in relation to the growth of the technologies designed to intervene in and manage the "transitions" between and within body, species, and milieu. The archaeological method deployed by *The Order of Things* would lead us to expect that these biopolitical "transitions" need to be understood simultaneously in terms of language, labor, and life, or again, in terms of the disciplines that take (really, make) these fields of experience as their objects.

My understanding, which I shall not be able to elaborate here, is that literary technologies such as figuration and translation that were crucial to the establishment of national language, aesthetics, and print capitalism ought to be seen in contiguity with the otherwise very different technologies of biology and medicine. Together, these heterogeneous technologies constitute an archaeology of biopolitical intervention in the speciation of the human. Needless to say, this is a different concept of literature from the one espoused by Foucault in *The Order of Things*, where literature functions as the name for a transgressive exteriority, much like madness in *Discipline and Punish*, that provides a clue to surpassing the modern *episteme* (Foucault 2001, 104-128). In other words, in addition to the literary 'outside' explored by the modernist avant-garde, there is also a literary 'inside'. "It is important to point out, however, that literature, like philosophy, is not always or necessarily on the side of transformative as opposed to everyday experience. It is just as likely, in fact much more likely, that what we call literature will bolster and reinforce accepted modes of experience and thought, than that it will undermine and transform them." (O'Leary 2008, 18). In *The Order of Things*, this 'inside' is concentrated in the new science of philology, which becomes a site of unconscious accumulation of collective memory (Foucault 2002, 324). Although Foucault characterizes "literature" as the domain that is "the contestation of philology" (Foucault 2002, 327), there is certainly another side—exemplified by the realist novel associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie, the propagation of national language, and the creation of the modern nation-state—that created templates for aesthetic normalization of population along national lines. This literary 'inside' is the aesthetic realization of the triad of economy/biology/philology that constitutes the archaeological strata of the modern *episteme*. As such, it performed a historically-significant biopolitical function, intervening in the organization and transformation of populations within the human species.

Why did Foucault not incorporate this powerfully in-formational and figurative aspect into his

understanding of literature? To do so would have subjected the concept of literature, upon which he relies as the figure of a transgressive outside, to a fundamental internal oscillation between figuration, stratification, and linguistic structure on the one hand and the “maximum of intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time” (Foucault 2001, 862) that he saw in avant-garde literature on the other. This in turn would have certainly contaminated the main achievement of *The Order of Things*, which was to alert us to the fundamental oscillation between the empirical and the transcendental in the constitution of modern Man. For this reason it is regrettable that Foucault was never able to connect his earlier work on the modern *episteme* to the later work on biopolitics, given that the Foucaultian concept of biopolitics has its roots in the search for a literary outside that defined his work from 1962 through 1966.

Judith Revel summarizes the transition from literature to biopolitics (Revel 2004) in Foucault’s work under the guise of a rejection of spatialized forms of difference, to which *The Order of Things* falls prey, and the discovery that resistance to objectification is not found only on the side of impossible objects—in the manner of Borges—but from the side of re-subjectification. The problem with Foucault’s attempt in the 1960s to think “the outside” through literature, according to Revel, is that even though he abandons very quickly the dialectical model (of transgression), he is still trapped by spatializing metaphors of “the outside”. This is exactly the problem that we have seen in the recuperation of culturalism in spite of Foucault’s stated intentions to avoid a history of cultural totalities. “It is precisely the theme of subjectification or, as he would say later, the *production of subjectivity*, that allowed Foucault to pass from the old [literary] theme of exteriority to the structure of order, the outside of objectivity or the refusal of procedures of objectification, to a non-spatialized political formula in the form of a practice of freedom” (Revel 2004, my translation). This biopolitical formula is thus “an outside that does not need exteriority to mark its difference, since rather than look for it elsewhere, in some other space, it inaugurates it right *here*, in a *present* [actualité] that has once again become creative”

(Revel 2004, my translation). Abandoning the literary model in favor of a biopolitical one, Foucault accomplishes a fruitful move from space to time and from epistemological exteriority to productive ontology.

It now seems more important than ever, however, to argue that the move from space to time effected by Foucault's transition to a biopolitical problematic contributed to his inability to tackle issues ostensibly related to territoriality, yet connected in fact to temporality, such as the constitution of the 'West'. Johannes Fabian's work on the temporality of otherness in colonial history (Fabian 1995), like Naoki Sakai's work on the colonial classification of difference (Sakai 2000), has alerted us to the problem of spatialization in colonial relations. The defining feature of the West is not, as culturalism would assume, a series of collective traits (religion, territory, race, language, etc.) that are virtually impossible to identify, but rather its capacity to organize its relation to others through the temporal model of self-producing subjectivity. The West is precisely the subject of a temporal process of unlimited accumulation acquired by means of expropriation and the totalization of experience in knowledge. According to this regime, the principal feature of the non-Western social formation is the characteristic reduction to a spatialized register—the typical image of which is that of the national cultural tradition.

Neoteny, biopolitics, and translation

Due to limitations of space, it is impossible to do anything more than briefly sketch how recent work by Paolo Virno (Virno 2000a, Virno 2000b) on the bioanthropological implications of neoteny and neurobiology ties language and biology together in a perspective that could help rectify the imbalance often seen in governmentality studies. Virno argues that the attempt to resolve the problems of neoteny through the creation of secondary cultural and political "pseudoenvironments" is fraught with dangerous contradictions—especially in an age in which species-specific faculties have been "tossed onto center stage [by "big industry"]", to the point

of making these faculties the genuine mainstay of modern production” (Virno 2008a, 41). In the postfordist age, it is precisely the inherent “instability” or “plasticity” of the human animal that is pushed into the forefront of production under the rubric of “flexibility”. Virno’s explicit aim is to find or invent institutions that would “avoid the delineation of a pseudoenvironment” for neotenous human animals. Although he does not come up with a solution, he does suggest that it may be found in relation to language—particularly the capacity to invent new ‘norms’ via constituent practice, rather than pre-constituted institutions—as seen in the context of the joke. Jokes, of course, have traditionally presented the greatest obstacle to translation, and many jokes, particularly those with an ethnic content, play on the problem of untranslatability. The connection between translation and humour amounts, in the final analysis, to the creation of innovative norms through praxis³. Nobody has written more persuasively about this aspect of translation with regard to the speciation of the human than Naoki Sakai. Essentially hybrid by nature, translational practice understood in the biopolitical sense that I see in Sakai’s work shares a fundamental affinity to the Foucault/Canguilhem ‘biological’ account of knowledge, which holds that, “an organism is...epistemically creative precisely by being in error” (Gutting 2002, 79). Etienne Balibar’s suggestion, now widely circulated, for a displacement of the identity through translation-as-a-common language (Balibar 2001, 318) constitutes an important step in the direction of finding a biopolitical response to the postfordist appropriation of our neotenous condition. Perhaps for these reasons we will come to think of translation in the same context as aphasia or the forgetting of language that is constitutive of our accession to it (Heller-Roazen 2008), seeing it as the non-event of non-relation, or, in other words, something that is not exceptional or extraordinary at all but a very ordinary occasion—filled with biopolitical significance for the multitude of foreigners.

Conclusion

In this short essay we have merely been able to sketch out the translations between

archaeology and biopolitics that will help save 'population' from imminent capture by governmentality studies. To summarize: 1) the concern with and resistance to biopower must intervene simultaneously on each of the three archaeologically-related levels of modern experience that are language, labor, and life and on the disciplines of knowledge that take them as their objects; 2) biopolitical study is at its best when focused on objects—such as sexuality and language, and, of course, labor—that are essentially hybrid by nature (or, to put it more precisely, constitute the crossroads where biopower enacts the operation of speciation); 3) intellectuals cannot simply focus on “self-contained” social objects related to one specific population, language, area, or discipline, any more than they can deny the practico-temporal aspects of the production of knowledge.

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¹ For further discussion on the problem of the deictic in relation to the biopolitics of translation, please refer to: 1) Jon Solomon, "Review of Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2004)", *The Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*, 7:1 (2008), <http://www.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/Fall2008/Clash%20of%20Empires.htm>; 2) Jon Solomon, "Transition to a world society: Naoki Sakai's work in the context of capital-imperialism", in Richard Calichman and John Namjun Kim, *Rethinking Cultural Difference: Around the Work of Naoki Sakai* (New York and London: Routledge, forthcoming 2010).

² Space limitation forces me to list without discussion the notable instances in Foucault's courses that give clues as to how he might conceive of the biopolitical role of language: 1) the reference to a "language-knowledge system" (Foucault 2003, 153-4); 2) the "linguistic suffering" experienced by a minority population facing expropriation by a central power

deploying a juridical apparatus that imposed upon the minority a hegemonic articulation between right and majority language (Foucault 2003, 100); 3) the communicational role of the police and its importance to the establishment of the inter-state system following the Treaty of Westphalia.

³ The fact that Virno takes the joke as his model, rather than translation, suggests the continuing difficulty (possibly due to disciplinary norms as we have seen with Deleuze's Foucault), of extending biopolitical intervention to the intersection between language and population.