

Life

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Since the end of the last century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to lay hold of the “true” experience . . . under the heading of a philosophy of life.

Benjamin (1968 [1940]), “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” p. 156.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, an old question has resurfaced, gliding above the map of radical philosophy: the question of Life in general and—in particular—Life in relation to the question of Time or temporality (Life is always measured in terms of its cessation), Life in relation to the question of political power and authority (Life measures “friend” vs. “enemy” in terms of political existence), and Life in relation to a slowly disappearing Nature in an era of accelerated economic and technological development. These considerations lead to the question of the relevance of progressive, humanistic ethics.

Popular culture has, on the one hand, anchored these philosophical questions in catastrophic stories about natural disasters beyond all assessment, as well as in the new literary following after superheroes who overcome all of Life’s physical limitations. Cracking the code of human DNA and the discovery of the practical ability to clone organs, and even entire life forms, have reawakened old slumbering inquiries into the meaning of Life, from popular science fiction to the realm of significant biological concepts regarding Life. The field of philosophy has made its own attempts to bring biology back into the political and ethical arena. New fields such as biopolitics or bioethics have transitioned from avant-garde philosophy—which perceives the question of Life as the foundation of a broad discussion about the ruling power and those being ruled—to essential concepts for discussions in conventional medicine and the exact sciences and among environmental activists and postcolonial critics. The line of questioning that unites these fields and focuses on the concept of Life relates, first and foremost, to the separation between Life and Death; especially with respect to the identification of “political” violence with the narrowing down of the concept of Life to a limited field, determining from above what “the law” is that separates life and death or how best to determine “the norm” of separation.

The central argument of the article is divided into two parts:

1. The historical-structural argument: Current political theory reflects Jewish-German theory of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this is not a matter of mere chance or random coincidence. From the perspective of Jewish-German criticism—that of Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, and Martin Buber or the Jewish-French criticism of Henri Bergson, all of which go back to the philosophy of Life according to Dilthey and Nietzsche—political theory deals with the problemization of Life along two distinct but integrated lines of thought: the problematic of temporality; the problematic of democratic politics in general, and of the state of emergency in democratic governments in particular.
2. Theoretical-political argument: Fragile political constructs which rose out of the darkness of the years predating or immediately after the rise of Nazism, perceive the political horizon as a catastrophic horizon of the ruling caste, the supervisory institutes, or the biopolitical, post-democratic society. In such a political atmosphere, Life will always be judged—along with death—as part of the hidden political governing structure. From here, current political theory deals with the structural formalization of ambiguity: the living subject/object, presence/absence, living on the verge of Death (the Camp Paradigm), and where Death is derived from the definition of Life itself (as in the argument about prolonging life). In more general terms, we can say that the debate over the concept of Life is bound up with the most basic questions from diverse disciplines—such as political theology, biopolitics, theological economics, and geopolitics—and combines fanciful geography and realistic fantasy, common to the spectator-showcase society of our times.

In all these cases, that which unites these varying perspectives is the connection between the concept of Life and the politics of the present time. Uniting these two lines of thought, current political theory quotes the well-known names: Benjamin, Schmitt, Rosenzweig, Gadamer, Deleuze, and Foucault; it often also unconsciously quotes the influence of the philosophy of Life according to Nietzsche, Bergson, and Dilthey. In other words, there is a significant attraction between the philosophy of Life at the end of the nineteenth century and current philosophical-political criticism—especially that which is currently identified as “biopolitical” criticism. When Giorgio Agamben writes tough criticism about “the permanent state of emergency” in U.S. politics today, and characterizes it in terms of the German 1920s and 1930s, he is actually quoting not only Schmitt, Benjamin, and Rosenzweig, but also the entire political-theoretical horizon of the current period’s philosophy of Life.

If we reformulate this notion from the opposite direction, the biopolitical criticism that stretched these lines of thought from life to death and back to life again; from law and politics in its pure form—its creation—and then to its disintegration; from its political

philosophical origins to its implementation and eventual undermining—all of this indicates a new philosophy of Life, one whose final goal is to ask why democracy at present is failing and where it is going in the future. Choosing the idea of Life—the moment of its creation and the moment of its conclusion—as a key concept in current political philosophy is, accordingly, a clear sign of frustration beyond the solutions of conventional democracy.

To conclude this introduction, it is important to note that the current revival of the “Life-philosophy” argument or “Life debate” (“vitalism”) echoes the new understanding of the concept of Life in general. The critical connection among the beginning of the modern philosophy of Life, contemporary political theory, and the idea of Life in general won an acute expression in a recent book: “As a radical or renegade discourse, vitalism represents protest, disillusion, and hope. Life often grounds opposition today, after the political disappearance of a subject/object of history and skepticism. . . . Life has become the watchword of today’s extraparliamentary politics.”¹

2. Background: Life in the Polis

Traditionally, Aristotle is seen as the first systematic philosopher to link “organic life” and politics. Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Rancière, among others, refer back to Aristotle in order to understand and conceptualize the meaning of life in the present. From Aristotle, they branch out to Jewish-German thought and French criticism, which is followed by the rise of “organic Life,” biopolitical criticism (*Kreatürlichkeit*, Creaturely Life) or the separation between the nakedness or bareness of the human animal, the *political* in its essence.²

In contrast to the Platonic ideal, Aristotle anchored basic human concepts in the arena of daily life: individual physical functions (identified with nakedness), actions in the community (marked as “clothed”), and actions in opposition to the ruling sovereign power. After a reasonably broad discussion of different political forms, the fourth century BCE already contended that life within the political framework of the “polis” was not to be taken for granted. Aristotle set down the law of the super-political. According to Aristotle’s *Politics*, Man is not simply a “political animal”—defined according to his ability for politics and for creating a rational collective; the political-geographical (the “polis”) is rather his life’s purpose and highest good. This definition actually assumes that man’s relation to Life can be defined according to his politics, even if he deviates from it. In other words, the “clothed” body always relates to the “naked” body, even when it is undressed, separated from its communal “skin,” exposing its internal organs, needs, and life’s wounds. The metaphor of clothing since Aristotle’s time (or the Book of Genesis) has served as a metaphor for a political need of law, very similar to the redundancy of a philosopher when one already knows the truth. As Aristotle shows in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (book 10,

chapter 9, 9), the aim of the law is “the whole life of the people generally; for the many are more amenable to compulsion and punishment than to reason and to moral ideals.” That is to say, the nature of man as a social animal creates a need for law, and society anchors its institutions in law, setting down the law as a plan or design. From here, as Aristotle shows in various writings, democracy creates a teleological construct, according to which the democratic regime is the realization of a human need in a political and social context. Furthermore, this construct is a realization of the democratization process from the very first moment of its establishment—from the inception of Draco’s regime in the seventh century BCE.³

In order to establish this type of “pre-realized” construct, Aristotle had to assume that the law is the “proper life” framework of the democratic regime. Accordingly, he explains that one of Draco’s successors, Solon, the great legislator, *changed his way of life* in order to avoid democracy’s exaggerated demands to change the law: “when Solon had organized the constitution in the manner stated, people kept coming to him and worrying him about his laws, criticizing some points and asking questions about others; so as he did not wish either to alter these provisions or to stay and incur enmity, he went abroad on a journey to Egypt . . . saying that he would not come back for ten years, as he did not think it fair for him to stay and explain his laws, but for everybody to carry out their provisions for himself.”⁴ As Aristotle shows, the development of the *polis* occurs together with the launching of democracy, and only tyranny can stop this mutual creation.⁵ In contrast to the popular perception of Aristotle, he *didn’t perceive war and the danger of death as a threat to democracy*, since in any case democracy relies on the carrying of weapons, as a sort external “accessory,” much like clothing: “Athens seems to have been well governed during this critical period, although a war was going on and the government was confined to the armed roll.”⁶ In his writings on biology, Aristotle also grounded the idea of the carrying of weapons in the biological function of Man—a function that is connected to the basic purpose of nature (the goal and process of which is evolution)—represented by the shape of the human hand.

Therefore, when discussing the principles of biology, Aristotle states that the philosophy of nature must be considered in light of the essential division between nature itself and the world of human life; nature must be perceived according to its purpose: “in the works of Nature purpose and not accident is predominant; and the purpose or end for the sake of which those works have been constructed or formed has its place among what is beautiful.”⁷ From the point of view of nature, Man “has hands because he is the most intelligent animal. . . . For man . . . many means of defense are available, and he can change them at any time, and above all he can choose what weapon he will have and where. Take the hand: . . . it can seize and hold them all.”⁸

In his *Metaphysics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle clarifies that in his discussion of “Life,” he is actually arguing in favor of the “good Life” (*bios*), which necessarily relates

to the “political”: “in order to be a competent student of the Right and Just, and in short of the topics of Politics in general, the pupil is bound to have been well trained in his habits.”⁹ In his argumentation Aristotle relies on the assumption that “the human species lives according to skill and thought processes”; meaning is determined according to experience and memory—categories that relate to the past and are constructed on the basis of accumulated experiences: “It is from memory that man acquires experience, because the numerous memories of the same thing eventually produce the effect of a single experience.”¹⁰ It appears, he writes, that “experience seems very similar to science and art; for as Polus rightly says, ‘experience produces art, but inexperience chance.’”¹¹ According to Aristotle, philosophy or science “is concerned with the primary causes and principles,”¹² “for speculation of this kind [scientific-philosophical] began with a view to recreation and pastime, at a time when practically all the necessities of life were already supplied.”¹³ In other words, the existence of the “naked life” (*zoē*) is the precondition for every thought, but in order to go beyond this, toward scientific-philosophical thought—the “good Life”—one must impose purposeful, teleological movement, the growth and design of nature, in parallel with political teleology.

The “justice of the city-state,” according to Aristotle, derives in part from nature and in part from the law: “there is such a thing as Natural Justice as well as Justice not ordained by nature; . . . The same distinction will hold good in all other matters; for instance, the right hand is naturally stronger than the left, yet it is possible for any man to make himself ambidextrous.”¹⁴ Hence, when Aristotle discusses the state of nature, he repeatedly scrutinizes “Life” through the rational human aspect of understanding. For Aristotle, the “absence of Life” refers to a lack of political ability, for example, in the situation of a slave: “there can be no friendship, nor justice, towards inanimate things; indeed not even towards a horse or an ox, nor yet towards a slave as slave. For . . . a slave is a living tool, just as a tool is an inanimate slave. Therefore there can be no friendship with a slave as slave.”¹⁵ The division between the “living” slave and “Life” infused with a sense of community is the division between the life of mere survival and that of the good life; the difference between *zoē* (the physical life) and that of *bios* (the life of the soul). In other words, “the naked life” of the slave or refugee, a life of exploitation, is not humanistic in essence; that said, slaves and refugees are the category by which humanity must be measured: the *zoē* must be taken for granted—perceived as a given—so that Man may go beyond its borders, evolve and develop thoughts about his/her experience and skills, rather than focus on mere survival. In order to be “human,” a citizen of the “polis” must not be a slave, subject to abuse and exploitation, a refugee, or any type of indentured servant.

The philosophy of Life began to rebel against this distinction at the close of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche was the first to emphasize that since the ancient Greece of Socrates and Aristotle, it has been impossible to speak about a pure life, life before “the good Life” and community life. As recently stated by Agamben: “to speak of a *zoē politikē* of the citizens of Athens”—as opposed to *bios politicos*—“would have made no sense.”¹⁶

The question that will be addressed further in the article, and that has currently captured the attention of political scholars engaged in the debate about Life, is whether 2,500 years after Aristotle's words were first uttered the West has succeeded in escaping the opposition between a "way of life" and the mere survival of the "bare life." Has the concept of the "good life," in fact, managed to change the definition of Life itself? Have 2,000 years of "politics" changed anything in the way we connect Life, its temporal nature, and the politics of life? And another pertinent question: why do we still need Aristotle in order to understand post-postmodern structures of control and governmentality?

3. The Modern Philosophy of Life

An answer to this line of questioning must necessarily begin with the Germany of the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the place and time where the "philosophy of Life" discussion (*Lebensphilosophie*) was revived as a major stream of philosophy. After hundreds of years of rational Aristotelian thought, the growth of Romanticism, patriotism, and the revolutions of central and Western Europe led to the development of a philosophy that, once again, emphasized Life: this time as a system that broke down barriers rather than a political demarcation defined as a "city-state."

Historians of philosophy usually identify the origin of the modern philosophy of Life movement with three famous philosophers: Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Henri Bergson. Following the contributions of these three thinkers, active during the European fin-de-siècle, the philosophy of Life achieved the status of a central methodology within the philosophical discipline.¹⁷ At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the key ideas of these thinkers penetrated different streams of European thought: for example, the sociology of the German Jew, Georg Simmel; the French right-wing politics of Georges Sorel, Charles Maurras, Charles Péguy, and De Gaulle; the poetry of the Czech-German Rilke; the plays of the Austrian poet and playwright Von Hoffmanstahl; the psychology and aesthetics of the Swiss Paul Haeberlin, the physical expression theory of the German Ludwig Klages; the theory of the rise and fall of Spengler's Western empires; the economics of the liberal Jewish foreign minister Walther Rathenau; the blood metaphors used in Martin Buber's and Franz Rosenzweig's Jewish philosophy; and the popular philosophy of the anti-Semitic scholars Alfred Rosenberg and Alfred Baumler, Ludwig Klages and Ernst Krieck. What united the Life philosophers more than anything else were the search for unity and the absolute, a return to primary experience and pre-language imagery, and an understanding of Life from the simultaneous instant of creation and formation, degeneration and dying. In contrast to the Kantian undermining of the "process" of rationalization and clarification, Life-philosophy proposed an infinite and endless "flow" that interpreted the presence through its own shadow.

Instead of the regular teleological path of advancement toward rational or spiritual enlightenment, the philosophy of Life insisted on referring to Life as a flow of separate moments. Rather than striving for redemption or a certain light, it considered a shadow inherent in every ray of light; rather than a list of causes and results, it assumed an interim dimension full of drives and the *unconscious* (a concept that was first coined by the Romantic philosophy of Life and not by Freud, as is commonly thought); for every sign of life, it searched for the nucleus of “death,” which lies hidden at the very core of every moment of “Life.”

The first seeds of the philosophy of life were spread during the late 1790s, with the anti-Kantian critique of Ernst Platner's 1796 *Philosophische Aphorismen*. Platner's work won the intense and destructive attention of J. G. Fichte, who disputed it by arguing against each claim and every line of the text.¹⁸ Despite the repeated attempts of neo-Kantianism to include “Life” within the framework of metaphysics, the final statement belongs to Graf York and the hermeneutics of Life: “the transcendental versus the metaphysical.”¹⁹ In 1920, after it became clear that the philosophy of Life was a significant anti-idealistic stream that chose aesthetic criticism over the *a priori* ethic, Heinrich Rickert (1936–1963), the famous neo-Kantian, published a harsh critique of the philosophy of Life.²⁰ In his book, two years after the death of his student and friend, the Jewish scholar Georg Simmel, Rickert attacked Simmel's concept of “the pure Life,” calling it “dangerous.” Together with this, alongside the criticism, Rickert felt obliged to recognize the intense pull of the philosophy of Life and to describe it as that which “cannot be perceived in the traditional systematic way.”²¹

4. The Philosophy of Life

The historian of philosophy Herbert Schnädelbach defined the philosophy of Life from a critical point of view: “life-philosophy makes life into a principle . . . it is a philosophical position which makes into the foundation and criterion of everything something which essentially stands *opposed* to rationality, reason, concepts or the Idea—life as something irrational. Life-philosophy can thus be described as *metaphysics of the irrational*.”²² Unlike Schnädelbach, Nietzsche, Dilthey, and Bergson perceived their role as the creators or architects of a new consciousness about the basic questions of Life. They did so first and foremost by rejecting superficial comparisons about the rational as opposed to the irrational. Nietzsche and Bergson focused on the question of time and human mortality (the ontology of Life or image of Life). Dilthey chose to focus on the question of historical time (the hermeneutics of Life). All three used the Kantian dichotomies and radicalized them in order to overcome them. The Nietzschean emphasis on “drive” (*Trieb*) or “impulse,” for example, completely undermined the accepted division between the irrational drive and its scientific classification. Nietzsche chose “the drive” as his alternative scientific

basis, as an essence that helped to formalize the regular contrasts of Western culture, for example, within the framework of the concept “eros” or by encouraging its component of the “repressed,” as a way of encouraging Dionysian creativity.²³

4a. Dilthey

Wilhelm Dilthey, the father of modern hermeneutics, formulated the connection between philosophical hermeneutics and the question of Life as being anchored primarily in living-experience, or *Erlebnis*. Following Kant, he separated the internal and living-experience from the external and “objective” experience, *Erfahrung*. Dilthey paid even closer attention at the center of his hermeneutics to the *temporality* of *Erlebnis*. In contrast to Kant’s *a priori* and “empty” time, Dilthey and Bergson, following him, identified an existential temporality where time is perceived as “a real manifestation of Life.”⁴²

Yet, in contrast to later *Lebensphilosophers* who promoted an absolute notion of *Erlebnis*, Dilthey continued to search for a way to link the internal and the external. He expanded upon the concept of external experience (*Erfahrung*) and its connection to temporality and Life, the foundation of modern “understanding.” He used both aspects of experience in his “introduction to the humanities,” in which—at the end of the nineteenth century—he created the disciplinary differentiation between the natural sciences and humanities. At the beginning of the twentieth century, apparently following in the footsteps of Nietzsche, Dilthey turned to the internal, intuitive, and aesthetic experience as an absolute basis for “the hermeneutics of Life.” Yet, at the same time, he tried to ground his ideas on a scientific base. “The ruling impulse in my philosophy,” he wrote in a “Preface” in 1911, his last year of life, “is the desire to understand”²⁵

A reading of Dilthey reveals that philosophers and historians who dealt with the metaphysics of Life tended to go back to Kantian oppositions, even if they disagreed with them. Dilthey builds the argument of “Life from within,” clearly based on his frustration with Kant as an explicit oppositionist paradigm: “I searched in Kant for the impulse that moved me. If we summarize fairly the reality of the spiritual world, it suggests a critical reading of Kant.”²⁶ Already in his earlier work on the theologian and Romantic writer Friedrich Schleiermacher, Dilthey fired the first shot for a systematic philosophy of Life in an attack on “Kantian structuralism” (1865).²⁷ According to Dilthey, the main problem with Kant’s approach is that his metaphysical construct places itself above and beyond the time that it alludes to; thus, examining human temporal and spatial order from above, it is a construct that has not been exposed and discussed in a reflective way.²⁸ Dilthey was the first systematic philosopher who linked the philosophy with Life and Time through the understanding of “Life-from-within.” In aesthetic terms, such a tie required a consistent formalization of oppositions and constructs, until the point where it is possible to cancel them out. Nearly a century later, the theoretician Peter Szondi showed that the philosophy

of Life in Germany and France had criticized the “fixation” on the division of opposites (opposition, polarity), and had acted in various ways in order to circumvent it, already several decades before the rise of post-structuralism. Szondi shows how, since Dilthey, it has been possible to perceive the height of the philosophy of Life as a philosophy of avant-garde, post-Romantic anti-Kantianism. In an article dedicated to the memory of Paul Celan, Szondi clearly ventured the idea that the roots of post-structuralism are found in the philosophy of Life of the German Romantic, Schleiermacher, with the mediation of Dilthey.²⁹ According to Szondi, Dilthey followed Schleiermacher’s attempt to formalize the Kantian line of oppositions, to clarify them and, in fact, to overcome them in the name of the aesthetics of the Immanent Life. Indeed, Dilthey’s hermeneutics of Life emphasized the integral violence of life-hermeneutics: “For the powerful form is determined with the very first thought of any specific work . . . and modifies in individuals not only the way of expression, but . . . also its creative force.”³⁰ “Hermeneutics that is understood in these terms,” Szondi comments in the conclusion to his essay, “is the instrument of critique.”³¹

In 1887, Dilthey established the journal *History of Philosophy Archive* and made partners of those who later became the leaders of the philosophy of Life in the beginning of the twentieth century, figures who have almost been forgotten today, but who at the beginning of that century were well-known names in almost every educated German household: Rudolf Eucken (1846–1926), who won the Nobel Prize in 1908, and the Jewish philosopher, Karl Joël (1867–1937), who tried to find a middle ground between *Lebensphilosophie* and neo-Kantianism.³² Temporality and finality were the principal organs all life philosophers kept referring to in their analyses, the attack on linearity and teleology their main focus. From the 1880s until his death, Dilthey identified the concept of time as the organizing principle of human experience, like psychology, politics, and philosophy. Based on the temporal experience of man, he understands the world (*Verstehen*) and creates a “worldview” (*Weltanschauung*). In the “Essence of Philosophy” (1907), he writes: “When viewed historically, every solution of a philosophical problem belongs to a situation present at that time. Man, this temporal creature, maintains the security of his existence, as long as he works in time, by lifting his creations out of the temporal flux as enduring objects.”³³

Following Dilthey, Henri Bergson stressed early on in *Matter and Memory* (1896) the concept of *duration* (*durée*) to define the physical or bodily image—an image that is very different from any other.³⁴ The body, he shows at the beginning of the book, is the lens through which all of Life’s basic relationships are mediated, between ideas and substance or the reality that surrounds us.³⁵ Bergson’s clear conclusion was that “questions relating to subject and object, to their distinction and their union, should be put in terms of time rather than of space.”³⁶ Questions about the vitalistic “duration” formalized by Bergson, and as was shown by Deleuze in 1966, actually related to the question of “a power to decide, to constitute problems themselves”³⁷ or to the relationship between the concepts of organization and disorganization: “the idea of disorder,” Deleuze writes about Bergson, “emerges from a general idea of order as a badly analyzed composite.”³⁸ The renewing of

vitalism, or the philosophy of Life, takes advantage of the temporal emphasis in order to create a concept of political multiplicity and shape a strategy of radical resistance to linear historicity. “Bergson is not one of those philosophers who ascribe a properly human wisdom and equilibrium to philosophy. To open us up to the inhuman and the superhuman (durations which are inferior or superior to our own), to go beyond the human condition: This is the meaning of philosophy, in so far as our condition condemns us to live among badly analyzed composites, and to be badly analyzed composites ourselves.”³⁹

4b. Nietzsche

Countless interpretations have been written about Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy of Life.⁴⁰ Focusing on the connection between approaches to Life and Temporality, the aesthetics of overcoming the polarity, and the close connection to biopolitics will help to further clarify the outlook presented here.

A small minority among Nietzsche experts notes the connection between the philosophy of Life and the questions it raised, thanks to the rise to consciousness of biopolitical subjects. In 2003, for example, Adam Thurschwell wrote that “Agamben’s political philosophy is even closer to Nietzsche’s than Derrida’s.” He tried to explain “Agamben’s valorization, in *Homo Sacer* and other works, of a new politics of life as such, and the articulation of the question of politics as a question of ‘power’—a philosophical framework that for Agamben limits the fundamental question of politics to: ‘Is today a *life of power* available?’”⁴¹ Thurschwell, it seems, provides one possible answer to the question that appears at the end of the introduction: Has the good Life, the political, changed the perception of Life in general?

According to Thurschwell, in the footsteps of Foucault and Agamben, the good Life focused the political question on the subject of “power.” From here, he shows, Nietzsche and Heidegger lead to Agamben as “a thinker of radical finitude, of the possibility of meaning (including ethical and political meaning) in a world from which every unearned—which is also to say, metaphysical—presupposition of transcendence is extirpated.”⁴² The usual result of this step, which goes back to ancient times, as a “search for a *polis* and *oikia* befitting this void and un presupposable community, is the *infantile* task of future generations.”⁴³

Adrian del Karo, who recently wrote about Nietzsche within the framework of the broad discussion of Man as a political animal, emphasizes Nietzsche’s criticism of human hubris, which identifies Man as being the “crown of creation.” According to Nietzsche, he claims, the life of Man is most meaningful when it is an animalistic life striving for “perfection,” as is shown in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and the notes compiled toward its writing (1882–83).⁴⁴ The meaning of the animalistic outlook is the adoption of a different perspective about the question of Life and the separation between Life and the good Life. Here, claims

del Karo, “Nietzsche’s post-humanism is *geocentric* in the sense that his ecumenical vision [that is opposed to the universalist-humanist one] requires humans to discover and inhabit the earth, and it is *biocentric* in the sense that it places the highest values on vitality per se, not just human vitality.”⁴⁵

Friedrich Balke developed these ideas one step further and identified Nietzsche’s entire social attitude with the biopolitical approach. Yet, here too, this was done based on Nietzsche’s identification with the Foucauldian attitude locating biopolitical power:

Nietzsche is undoubtedly the philosopher of this modern man and his politics insofar as he no longer grafts—as was done throughout the philosophical tradition of pre-modern Europe—the good life (bios) onto mere physical existence (zoe) (what Foucault calls “substrate”), but conceptualizes the content of good life as the result of processes that continually intervene into the “bare life” and give it form. The categories Nietzsche uses to determine the nature of these life-forming processes constantly shift between the semantics of cultivating and the semantics of breeding.⁴⁶

In other words, according to Balke, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Agamben meet at a point where “grand politics” and the juxtaposition of the bare life and the good life, the individual and the community, is committed to pluralism and meaning, trying to overcome “minor politics” with its dichotomous divisions and its metaphysical structures: “if the main task of the new philosophy envisioned by Nietzsche is to strengthen life continually, this cannot be done without simultaneously excluding life that ‘does not deserve to be lived’ . . .”⁴⁷

To summarize this section, not only Nietzsche’s discussion but also a discussion of his acceptance and influence, as stated by Steven Aschheim, became a political and ideological issue. According to Aschheim, the discussion that took place from 1880–1990 adhered to the division of rational and irrational categories and the ideological gaps between a reactionary, interpretive outline and a liberal, even anarchic, interpretive construct—a division that became very strong after 1945. Indeed, in recent years, we have witnessed a return to the types of questions raised by the philosophy of Life of the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, or in an even more clear manner, to the discussion that asks questions from the perspective that does not qualitatively differentiate between the absolute control of Life and the democratic management of Life. From a biopolitical, geocentric, or biocentric point of view, the question of the political is always a question about the relevance of the good Life compared to the naked Life—or a question of the pluralistic time construct where different experiences and different outlooks (Nietzsche’s “perspectivism”) create different, albeit related, worlds. With regard to this connection, neither a totalitarian outlook nor a liberal value system can take control, unless the decision is made to obliterate the individual and the naked or bare life within the total politicization of Life. Here, Agamben’s accusing finger points equally at imperialistic, military control as

well as the capitalistic control of the global economy that erases the boundaries between the household and the “globe” (*oikonomia*—from *oikos*, the “household”). Both constructs claim that they “release” the individual. Both constructs brainwash the individual through the use of a general imagery system of “the good Life” and the exclusion of the “bare Life.” Nietzsche (together with Dilthey and preceding Bergson) tried to expose this power construct and to point to power as the central status of the “good Life” in the *polis*.

5. Rosenzweig and Benjamin: “The Need of the Hour”

Current political theory is heavily influenced not only by Nietzsche and his students, but also by the harsh reality that enveloped Europe after World War I and the Treaty of Versailles. An atmosphere of political collapse hovered above Europe from the early 1910s and until the unprecedented destruction of the mid-1940s. The “legislative philosophers,” as Nietzsche called them, just before the beginning of the destruction, were forced to consider which tools would be suitable for the integration and processing of Nietzschean philosophy within the framework of the 1920s in Germany. The philosophy of Life turned vehemently against idealistic philosophy and—as it interpreted its political manifestation—the democratic illusion of equality and freedom. Hence, the first task is clearly Nietzschean: exposing the illusion of the past political world formed by the French-German Enlightenment and Anglo-Saxon liberalism. Does the criticism also have a humanistic point of origin? According to Nietzsche, there is no clear answer to this question, and the argument continues today.⁴⁸ Agamben and other critics of liberalism provide a clearer answer—we must rid ourselves of the liberal illusion according to which the detailed economic system is the basis of the freedom of the individual; however, it is still not clear how we go on from here. Which democratic and pluralistic politics are not based on global economics? The common denominator of all the radical political scholars is the understanding that the concept of Life stands at the center of contemporary historical and conceptual political thought.

The most serious attempt to extract a sense of responsibility toward the “Other” from this criticism was undertaken in the 1920s by a line of Jewish-German scholars, among them Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig discussed Nietzschean criticism in his introduction to *The Star of Redemption* (1921): “the new land that Nietzsche opened to thinking had to extend beyond the circle described by ethics.”⁴⁹ According to Rosenzweig, exposing the ethical illusion at the heart of modern Western culture will lead to “virgin ground” that must be considered in terms of pure existence, beyond questions of local politics, be they catastrophic or otherwise. Rosenzweig’s message is a radical one, and a successful one at that, for even the Nazis in the 1920s did not manage to erase the radical plurality hidden in the German philosophy of Life of the previous century. Rosenzweig explains this a decade before the Nazis came to power: “the opposition between the view

of life and view of the world takes such a sharp turn into opposing the ethical part of the view of the world that it would seem preferable to call the questions of the view of life metaethical.”⁵⁰

Walter Benjamin quoted Rosenzweig in his article on Franz Kafka in 1934 in order to conceptualize the notion that exposing pure existence and the bare Life can be achieved only by abstaining from—or completely rejecting—institutionalized norms (in the article, Benjamin quotes philosophers of Life-philosophy and discusses arguments related to the philosophy of Life of the 1920s, and even warns against interpreting it or Kafka indirectly; in other words, according to psychoanalysis or theology). Benjamin characterizes Kafka and Rosenzweig through the plea of both to adhere to the urgent “need of the hour”: “If you miss your chance now, you miss it forever!”⁵¹ Benjamin tries to explain the “need of the hour” as a shortcut to the heart of French aesthetics. In the introduction to the famous work on Baudelaire, he goes back to the vitalist philosophy of Life as the main method that stood behind the preparation for the “Arcades Project”:

Since the end of the nineteenth century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to grasp ‘true’ experience, as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses. These efforts are usually classified under the rubric of “vitalism.” Their point of departure, understandably enough, has not been the individual’s life in society. Instead they have invoked poetry, or preferably nature—most recently, the age of myths. Dilthey’s book *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* represents one of the earliest of these efforts, which culminate with Klages and Jung, who made common cause with fascism.⁵²

Later on in the article, Benjamin criticizes Bergson as someone who misses “the experience in nakedness” because of his tendency to cling to the linear time of duration (*durée*), thus canceling out the necessary Death aspect, as opposed to Baudelaire’s “spleen,” which “exposes the isolated experience in all its nakedness.”⁵³

The German and German-Jewish Life philosophers succeeded, despite their totalist tendencies, and maybe because of them, in appreciating the obsession of the period with the presence of Death, inherent at every beginning of Life. In “Central Park,” from the same year, which was also intended to be included in the book on Baudelaire, Benjamin writes: “Spleen is the feeling that corresponds to catastrophe in permanence.”⁵⁴ In a letter to Max Horkheimer from the same period, Benjamin reports on the preparations of an essay on Baudelaire, and admits that the heart of the matter, in his opinion, lies in the Nietzschean concept of “eternal return,” upon which his writings about Baudelaire are based.⁵⁵ In the methodological article on “The Storyteller” (1936), he describes his method of understanding, which begins with the return of the dead to the center of every life-story, a presence erased by the bourgeois-liberal narrative. Benjamin’s leaning on typical post-Nietzscheans, such as Ludwig Klages, shows that the horizon upon which he rests is

not one of a real “state of emergency,” but rather Nietzsche’s “ongoing state of emergency,” which he presents in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940) as a critical horizon that deviates from traditional historicism. Without background information about the Philosophy of Life, it is difficult to understand Benjamin’s writings.

Walter Benjamin wasn’t the only one to identify the connection between the philosophy of Life and the “decree of the hour,” a more urgent plea than “the need of the hour.” Many other German Jews wrote along similar lines. Countless articles and books transformed the German philosophy of Life into a radical philosophical stream at the beginning of the 1920s in Germany. Furthermore, its leaders, for example the father of critical sociology Georg Simmel, became popular philosophers, read not only by academics, but also by “the educated” in general. These, in turn, influenced academics who sought out new ways in which to connect academic philosophical theories—mainly Kantian in nature—and modernity gone wild. Benjamin, who was deeply influenced by both Nietzsche and Rosenzweig, adopted many of their ideas about Life (less so from Cohen and Simmel) and even examined, through them, what he called the “weak messianic power,” which in his opinion characterized the essence of Jewish thought. In their writings, both Benjamin as well as Rosenzweig criticized—even if they did so out of a deep appreciation—the Jewish neo-Kantian philosopher, and Rosenzweig’s mentor, Hermann Cohen, who worked intensively to support the Kantian understanding and its “categorical imperative” against Nietzschean doubt and nihilism.

Following Nietzsche’s announcement regarding the “death of God,” the question of pure or naked violence arose from a secular perspective as a question of sovereign legitimacy, which the modern regimes, according to Carl Schmitt and “political theology,” tried to blur. In contrast, Benjamin gradually adopted the rhetoric of the philosophy of Life, even when the anti-Semites gradually adopted it as well during the period of the 1920s and 1930s. One year after Hitler’s rise to power, and opposite various ideological streams, among them those identified as “Jewish”—Freudian psychoanalysis and the theology his friend Gershom Scholem researched—Benjamin positioned the “creation” philosophy of the late German hermeneutics as it was developed by members in the George circle and by the Nietzschean philosophy of Life of the 1920s.⁵⁶ Opposite the liberal theory of the state, he emphasized in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” the reality and implications of the “political” on human daily existence: “the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live,” he wrote, “is not the exception but the rule.”⁵⁷ The only way he could capture and conceptualize this situation was by stressing “the problem of the organization of Life,” as he discussed in his writings about Kafka.

6. Buber and the Migration of the Concept of Life

Seven years after Benjamin's death, Martin Buber, whom Benjamin rejected as a metaphysician, reiterated Benjamin's warning about "missing the hour." By writing about the concept of Life in the 1920s and radical Life-philosophy, Buber tried with all his power to figure out which hour, precisely, had been missed. Nietzsche's influence on Martin Buber is well known.⁵⁸ Less well known is the fact that much of Buber's later writings were filtered and written in response to Schmitt's and Heidegger's interpretations of Nietzsche. Paul Mendes-Flohr claimed that "a strong trace of Nietzsche's influence can be discerned in all of Buber's thought."⁵⁹ In a different place, Mendes-Flohr recognized other sources from life-philosophy: "Buber sought to forge a principle of language that would take into account its putative epistemological limitations while affirming its cognitive dignity. He initially found a key in the concept of *Erlebnis*—inner, effective experience—as propounded by his teacher at the university of Berlin, Wilhelm Dilthey."⁶⁰ Until reading Heidegger at the height of the "dialogue period," Buber followed in the footsteps of *Zarathustra* and *Erlebnis* in understanding the world as a "creation" that calls for "the liberation of the Dead." As Shmuel Hugo Bergmann wrote in his preface to the famous *I and Thou* from 1923: "According to Buber, nothing dies in the world . . . the whole world is creation".⁶¹ In spite of this, it is clear that Death may be erased from the "creation" only if Death is transformed into a permanent and essential presence in Life. Buber, recognized as the man who divided and reconnected the world of "I" (*Ich*) and "Thou" (*Du*), self and other, man and the divine, took advantage of the inclusion of Death into Life and of Life into Death in order to criticize the usual and accepted methods of division and separation. He criticized the comparison of the public sphere of institutions with the private sphere of the life of the soul, as a stark reduction of thought: "Life is created by the third [between the life of the 'I' and the life or death of the 'thou', N.L]; this is the presence of the 'thou' or I should say, the key 'thou' that occurs in the presence."⁶²

Buber bases his theory of "I and Thou" on Nietzsche. More accurately, he positions his theory in close relation to Nietzsche's section on "the friend" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "At least be my enemy!—Thus speaks true respect that does not dare to ask for friendship. If one wants a friend, then one must also want to wage war for him: and in order to wage war, one must be able to be an enemy. One should honor the enemy even in one's friend. . . . In one's friend one should have one's best enemy. You should be closest to him in heart when you resist him."⁶³

Buber's "third" may be the "other," the "friend" who is also the "enemy," made famous later by Levinas. In political philosophy, this "other" is also the "third" mentioned by Carl Schmitt, the scholar who understood that hostile relations, just like relations of love, are no more than a reflection of the *politeia* of Life, of the good Life and the perception of the bare Life. This third is found, says Schmitt, between the sovereign and his subject, between the "I" and the "enemy."⁶⁴ From 1932 onwards, Buber went from an intensive discussion of Nietzsche and his followers to a critical and no less intensive discussion of Carl Schmitt.⁶⁵

In 1947, Buber returned to “Life of Mortals” and its connection with the separation and division between the public and private spheres versus national, religious, political, and theological law.⁶⁶ Buber chose to begin the article on “the political principle” with an analysis of the perception of Christian “tax,” as it appears in the Gospel of Matthew (verse 22). Following in the footsteps of his teacher, Georg Simmel, Buber wrote about the tax as having symbolic-political value, symbolizing “giving to Caesar” absolute political authority. Buber posed the question: Is payment to the emperor a means of identifying the emperor with god-given power? Buber showed that a negative answer not only means that the emperor’s role has been reduced to the secular role of a tax collector, but also a minimization of the role of God: “instead of being the Lord of existence, God is made into the God of religion.”⁶⁷ It seems then that the expulsion of God is much harder to achieve than the minimizing of secular authority, which operates through symbolic terms to recreate the religious authority and imitate its power once again: “The political principle,” wrote Buber following the “Crown Jurist of the Third Reich” Carl Schmitt, “no longer confronts the individual and places a demand on him, like its predecessor; it permeates his soul and conquers his will.” “Man,” he continues, “is essentially Caesar’s. . . . In a human world so constituted, to discuss the value and limitation of the political principle in the spirit of the saying about tribute money means to criticize at the decisive point the would-be *absoluta*, the archons of the hour.”⁶⁸

Following Stirner and Nietzsche, writes Buber, we became aware of the ontological debt of history. Also Heidegger, in the footsteps of Hegel, cannot give up the idea of “a suprahistorical reality that sees history and judges it. For both philosophers . . . absurdity lies in wait for every attempt to reflect on it [time] in this way no matter whether time be contemplated as finite or as infinite . . . the time-bound thinker ascribes to the state’s current drive to power the character of an absolute and in this sense the determination of the future.”⁶⁹ A short while later, Buber returned to the other philosopher of Life-in-emergency, Carl Schmitt, and to the total state of exception: “The accumulated power of mastery thrives on drawing profit from a—so to speak—latent exceptional condition. . . . note carefully that I do not speak of the conduct of war itself . . . I refer only to that realm of life in which free decision becomes unexpectedly unfree.”⁷⁰

7. Gadamer

In his monumental summary on the hermeneutics of Life, Hans-Georg Gadamer—who himself was a student of the Dilthey school and that of Martin Heidegger—clearly links the three fathers of the philosophy of Life, Dilthey, Nietzsche, and Bergson, in

a connection with totality, with infinity. . . . [The] appeal to living feeling against the cold rationalism of the Enlightenment . . . the rebellion of the *Jugend*

Bewegung (Youth Movement) against bourgeois culture and its institutions was inspired by these ideas, the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche and Henry Bergson played a part, but also a “spiritual movement” like that around Stefan George and, not least, the seismological accuracy with which the philosophy of Georg Simmel reacted to these events. The life philosophy of our own day [Gadamer is writing in 1960] follows on its romantic predecessors. The rejection of the mechanization of life in contemporary mass society makes the word seem so self-evident that its conceptual implications remain totally hidden.⁷¹

According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the current reality at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first poses questions that are closer to Aristotle than to early Modernism. In his opinion, much like the view expressed by Martin Heidegger, it is precisely at the present time that the Greek questions about the relationship among Life, the household, and society are once again at the forefront of philosophy and politics: “today we see and hear a great deal about an emergent ecological consciousness. This is perhaps one of the helpful signs in our critical world situation. . . . The Greek word *oikos* meant the domestic house and in this connection we also speak of the ‘household’. . . . it includes not only the ability to manage by one’s self, but also the ability to manage along with other people.”⁷² The way to get there, long known to start with the Aristotelian *oikos*, passes through the rhythm of Life or “the rhythm of sleeping and waking, the rhythm of illness and recovery, and finally, at the end, the transition into nothingness, the expiring movement of life itself. These are temporal structures which modulate the entire course of our lives.”⁷³ Therefore, recommends Gadamer, “one form of help which each of us can provide for ourselves, it seems to me, is to learn properly how to integrate this reliance on one another into our own lived existence. This is rather analogous to . . . the self-sustaining rhythm of our own bodily lives.”⁷⁴ In his classic *Truth and Method* (1960), Gadamer researched the roots of the philosophy of Life as a modern hermeneutic problem: “its teleological meaning is taken into account, but it is not conceptually determined. That life (*Leben*) manifests itself in experience (*Erlebnis*) means simply that life is the ultimate foundation. . . . An experience is no longer just something that flows past quickly in the stream of conscious life; it is meant as a unity and thus attains a new mode of being one. . . . What can be called experience constitutes itself in memory.”⁷⁵

In his later writings, Gadamer returns to a discussion of the ideas of Greek life as a question of simple survival and, to a large extent, the modern politicization of the ideas of Life. From the end of the nineteenth century, the emphasis on life from the perspective of “mere life” was revived, but was now accompanied by a question mark. The anatomical “rhythm” described by Gadamer was part of the perception that placed Life at the very heart of the “political.” It perceived the human body as a metaphor and an object of the anatomical-political argument and biosociological decision. In spite of his heavy emphasis on ancient Greek—especially Aristotelian—philosophy of body and politics, Gadamer’s “rhythm of Life” differed from that of Aristotle. In contrast to the clear exit from the bare

life of the individual to the good life of the *politeia*, Gadamer focuses on life as it relates to the Diltheyan “living experience.”

8. Foucault and Deleuze: Biopolitics and the Immanent Life

Michel Foucault, unlike Gadamer, actually tried to find an alternative that would portray Man as oppressed by a “dangerous” governing system. Therefore, he focused on “Life” as an ambivalent and, more than once, misleading concept.

According to the ideas of Foucault, these developments belong to the historical process beginning with the opening of the eighteenth century and peaking at the beginning of the twentieth century: the process of government control over the field of biology, “the control of power over Life” or “state control over biology.” Foucault shows that understanding the political process requires a return to the classic perception of sovereignty:

in the classical theories of sovereignty, the right of life and death was one of sovereignty’s basic attributes. Now the right of life and death is a strange right. Even at the theoretical level, it is a strange right. . . . If we take the argument a little further, or to the point where it becomes paradoxical, it means that in terms of his relationship with the sovereign, the subject is, by rights, neither dead nor alive. From the point of view of life and death, the subject is neutral, and it is thanks to the sovereign that the subject has the right to be alive or, possibly, the right to be dead. . . . It is the power to “make” live and “let” die.⁷⁶

According to Foucault, this approach perceives Man as no more than a biological “species,” a “body,” that functions within the framework of “anatomy-politics.” Foucault refers to this field as “biopolitics” and explains how modern political science examines the question of Life through questions about birth and death (demographics, universal health benefits, a forced system of insurance, and so on) and, for the most part, changes it:

[D]eath was now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes and weakens it . . . biopolitics will derive its knowledge from, and define its power’s field of intervention in terms of, the birth rate, the mortality rate, various biological disabilities, and the effects of the environment. . . . It is a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted.⁷⁷

The mechanisms that control the biopolitical are, for the most part, mechanisms that control Life, mechanisms of regulation and safety, which are rapidly internalized again as

“biological capabilities.” The implication for Foucault’s biopolitics was the reduction of boundaries between the external and internal, and the political attempt to control society as a whole.

In *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault explains the contemporary “biopower” theory as part of the revolution that propels history back to the past, to the origins of power and the origins of the Law:

[A]s the technology of wars has caused them to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiates them and the one that terminates them are in fact increasingly informed by the naked question of survival. . . . If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population.⁷⁸

And from here, “the old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administrations of bodies and the calculated management of life.”⁷⁹ Two years after he published this text, Foucault integrated the return to the concept of political life with the term “biopolitics.” In his seminar on “The Birth of Biopolitics,” he explains that by the theme of biopolitics, he “meant the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, race. . . . We know the increasing importance of these problems since the nineteenth century, and the political and economic issues they have raised up to the present.”⁸⁰ In other words, during the period after the catastrophe of the annihilation and the atomic bombs, similar to the period following the Cold War, which prolonged and extended a potential universe of destruction, it became clear that the “good Life” offered by the *polis* as Life is no longer the issue. Democratic politics—as was made clear by a series of laws, made redundant in advance within the framework of the “state of emergency”—was exposed as a set of control practices that are not significantly different from their “immoral” opponents. It turns out that the difference between the good Life and the bare Life is quantitative, not qualitative.

Deleuze, following Foucault, developed an approach to Life and interpretation of Nietzsche within the framework of the concept of *immanence*. Deleuze takes the concept of Life outside the movement between the powerful and the powerless, the sovereign power and the powerless subject. “We will say of pure immanence,” wrote Deleuze, “that it is A LIFE. And nothing else. . . . A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss.”⁸¹ Nietzsche explains that the future philosopher, and necessarily the Life philosopher, will have to be “both artist and doctor—in one word, legislator.”⁸² The modern state—which Foucault describes as a “biopolitical” state—is described by Nietzsche as “ant colonies, where the leaders and the powerful win through their baseness, through the contagion of this baseness and this buffoonery. Whatever the

complexity of Nietzsche's work, the reader can easily guess in which category (that is, in which type) he would have placed the race of 'masters' conceived by the Nazis."⁸³ In other words, Deleuze, like Foucault and in the tradition of the philosophy of Life, posits that a modern interpretation of the politics of Life must consider first and foremost the temporality of immanence: the way in which different political regimes have understood Life and the perception of Time as a path, whose end, its *telos*, is identified with the political-ideological *telos* of the regime. An immanent perspective of Life—understanding its aggressive potential—exposes the compelling ideological constructs and helps us to think about Life as a philosophy whose basis is temporality, flowing toward the point of conclusion, which continually returns to infiltrate each and every moment of Life.

Looking at these observations from the outside, one notes how the discourse of life is still prominent in the post-Deleuzian and post-Foucauldian era: Following Deleuze, Alain Badiou was uncompromising about the importance of the idea of Life. He linked it, on the one hand, to the tradition of "the Life argument," and on the other, to current biopolitical philosophy: "The name of Being [for Deleuze] is Life. But it is so for who does not take life as a gift, treasure or survival, but as a thought returning to where every category breaks down. All life is naked. All life is denuded, abandoning its garments, codes, and organs."⁸⁴ As far as Deleuze was concerned, writes Donna Jones, "life itself refers to the process by which virtuality, this spark of life, concretizes itself into actuality or creaturely forms while ever differentiating itself. . . ."⁸⁵

9. The Biopolitics of the Pure Life: Giorgio Agamben

Giorgio Agamben has quoted Foucault and Benjamin as essential keys opening the doors of contemporary politics. Foucault's perception of Life appears in various places throughout Agamben's writings, often in a way that links him with Nietzschean criticism. In his article on "Absolute Immanence," for example, Agamben opens the discussion with Foucault's definition of Life. According to Foucault and Agamben, that which characterizes the concept of Life toward the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is that "at the limit, life . . . is what is capable of error. . . . With man, life reaches a living being who is never altogether in his place, a living being who is fated 'to err' and 'to be mistaken.'"⁸⁶

After an arcane quote from Foucault, Agamben admits that he also attempts to reach a "third axis, distinct from both knowledge and power," which Deleuze suggests he [Foucault] needed, and which the essay on Canguilhem [Foucault's teacher] defines *in limine* as "a different way of approaching the notion of life."⁸⁷ The connection of a "third axis" of this type with the sovereignty of a state of emergency (close to the Platonic "legislature/lawmaker")—"the third" of Carl Schmitt—clarifies, in his opinion, the real

control mechanism of the biopolitical discourse on Life.

At the beginning of *Homo Sacer* (1998), Agamben discusses the Aristotelian division between “the good Life,” which defines modern democratic institutions, and “the bare Life,” from which these institutions have seized control. If this is the case, at the beginning of the new century the definition of Life slowly becomes the definition of that which is controlled by political institutions with, for the most part, economic interests. These institutions use *oikos* (the household) and *oikonomia* in order to shape a modern consciousness, with the intention of demonstrating from the outset how “the ‘beautiful day’ of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it.”⁸⁸ The meaning here will be the complete exclusion of the political in the name of the “good Life.” Faced with this type of act—that of exclusion—a political system is required to rewrite language itself because “Language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself.”⁸⁹ The “other,” excluded, or the “third” of Schmitt is transferred to the contents of language and is interred within it as “dead-alive”, “present-absent,” the inclusive- exclusion that is incorporated into the language by its actual lack of presence.

According to Agamben, the conceptual basis of current modern democracy is evident in the connection between pre-totalitarian practices and theoretical-democratic processes; between pre-totalitarian Germany and the post-democratic U.S. The history of the “state of emergency,” as it appears in the American “Patriot Act” from October 2001, is already latent in the history of the German philosophy of Life of the 1920s and Hitler’s rise to power.⁹⁰

Armin Shaeffer shows, in a fascinating article on the history of biopolitical discourse, that the Aristotelian division between the “bare Life” and the “good Life” stood at the base of the biosociological discourse that Foucault proposed as a discourse of “life-creating and the permission to die.”⁹¹ At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, an economic structure anchored in statistics and demographics replaced Marxist ideas about capital. The core of the biopolitical regime focused on narrowing the strategy of life and death practices to terms related to controlling the body or the way we perceive it and think about it.⁹² For instance, a change of the anatomo-political discourse during the nineteenth century led to the rise of heredity terms, which were, in turn, incorporated into the disciplinary terminology. In other words, the discourse itself took over its own conditions of formation and censured those venues that diverted from it. Personal memory was discussed as something that must be functional, like a “soldier’s march,” something “that must be used to discipline and educate kids” for future use, a little like “dance pedagogy.”⁹³ The well-educated implemented such sociopolitical tools on the new conception of the “spirit,” and translated them to the more specific notions of exclusion or inclusion, grounded in “fertility” and “vitality” or “degeneration.” “By the

end of the twentieth century,” Shaeffer writes, “everything in the life-sciences was stapled with ‘organization.’ As long as physiology and other evolutionary theories describe life as an organized structure they necessarily separate the ‘lively’ or ‘full of life’ (*Belebte*) and ‘lifeless’ (*unbelebte*).”⁹⁴

Shaeffer, like Gadamer, plants his hopes for a better future in “the organization of life from both sides of the visible,” the environment and “meaningless” organic existence.⁹⁵ Against the hermeneutic effort to arrange life in organizational structures, it is possible to state “a wide life-experience beyond all knowledge, science, and ontology.”⁹⁶

10. Conclusion

This article studies the surprising revival of the German or French-German philosophy of Life—in a world after deconstruction—and attempts to examine its surroundings. This phenomenon has become meaningful mainly as a result of the connection created by biopolitical criticism between politics and Life, the “good life” (*bios*) and the “bare life” (*zoē*). This article claims that the thoughts and ideas about the concept of Life at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth reveal an affinity among the perceptions of Life, temporality, and politics before they were processed by the collapse of democracy in Europe and the destructive politics of the German Reich. More specifically, the article attempts to focus on the revival of the concept of Life in contemporary political philosophy as part of a wave of criticism that refuses to automatically accept the claim of moral superiority with respect to the global, liberal-democratic system, and demands that it obey its own rules or set out on a journey that begins with exposure and cancellation of the existing power system.

Many of these theoretical arguments may seem far-fetched and unrealistic when they are weighed against the concreteness of ethnic religious wars in the Middle East. However, clichés such as “the only democracy in the Middle East” necessitate a much sharper form of thinking about democracy and the political condition. Do sixty years of law based on the principle of a “state of emergency” allow for democratic action that will protect the idea of Life? Does the most noticeable Israeli avant-garde—the economic-global avant-garde of security-related technology and various surveillance technologies—serve democracy or its opposite? If the answer is negative, how is the idea of the “good Life” harmed? How is the “bare Life” used to promote its abuse? Political understanding in Israel has dedicated very little historical thought beyond its own borders to the ideas of Life (and Death) that drive it. Does the status of being the only democracy in the region allow Israel to look at its own “two hands,” the hands that Aristotle positions opposite the weapon of wisdom, to ignore its activities in the places it feels are irrelevant? Is it possible to differentiate between achievements in fields such as biotechnology and military actions and the specific tradition

of political education? Do the biotechnological solutions of the twenty-first century bring us closer to environmental disaster with the same “hands” or could it be that everything comes to an end with Martin Heidegger’s answer to Karl Jaspers, when the latter asked him: “How shall a person as uneducated as Hitler rule Germany?” “Education,” he replied, “does not matter. You should just see his wonderful hands!”⁹⁷? Biopolitical criticism has taught us how easy it is to abuse the concept of life, but also how radical and full of critical potential it is.

Endnotes

1. Donna V. Jones’s book presents an ever-growing tendency to perceive the modern idea of Life as a product of the previous century’s “discourse of Life” and its political developments. Jones’s topics of discussion are broad: From Bergson’s life- philosophy to postcolonial theory, and its actual realization in three different continents. In theoretical terms, her arguments range from a very general discussion on the background of the philosophy of Life at the end of the nineteenth century, to a contemporary discussion of Foucault, Agamben, Hardt and Negri, Elizabeth Grosz, and in particular, Deleuze and postcolonial theorists such as Echille Mbembe. See: Donna V. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 17.
2. See the recent publications by Jacques Derrida that deal with these concepts and illustrate the transition to the biopolitical discussion. This is despite Sam Weber’s comment that “If Derrida never mentions the notion of the ‘biopolitical’ it is perhaps because this emphasis on ‘a life’—on life in the singular—is incompatible with the generalizing perspective of biopolitics.” See: Sam Weber, “Rogue Democracy and the Hidden God,” in: *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, edited by Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press 2006), p. 393. For a detailed discussion of the concept of “creaturely life,” see: Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
3. Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution*, translated by H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), iv, 1. This conception is opposed to what we mean today by “draconian law,” namely the cruel aspect of the creator of the first constitution in Western history.
4. Ibid., xi, 1.
5. Ibid., xxiii, 1.
6. Ibid., xxxiii, 2.
7. Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, translated by A. L. Peck (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1955), I, v.
8. Ibid., IV, x.
9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), I, iv, 6.
10. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, translated by Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University

- Press, 1956), I, i, 4.
11. Ibid., 5.
12. Ibid., 15.
13. Ibid., I, ii, 11.
14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V, vii, 3-4.
15. Ibid., VII, xi, 6-7.
16. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 1.
17. Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831–1933*, translated by Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
18. Ernst Platner, *Philosophische Aphorismen, Nebst einigen Anleitungen zur philosophischen Geschichte* (Leipzig: Schwickertschen Verlage, 1793), in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Supplement zu Nachgelassene Schriften*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Freidrich Frommann Verlag, 1977).
19. Gudrun Kühne-Bertram, *Aus dem Leben- zum Leben: Entstehung, Wesen und Bedeutung populär Lebensphilosophien in der Geistesgeschichte des 10. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt a.M: Peter Lang Verlag, 1987), p. 130.
20. Heinrich Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens, Darstellung und Kritik der Philosophischen Modeströmung unserer Zeit* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr Verlag, 1920).
21. “Im alten Sinn systematisch darf also des Lebensphilosoph nicht denken,” *ibid.*, p. 16.
22. Schnädelbach, p. 141 (emphasis in the original).
23. Jacob Golomb, *Nietzsche’s Enticing Psychology of Power* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987), p.77.
24. Rudolf A. Makreel, *Dilthey, Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 387.
25. Wilhelm Dilthey, “Vorrede,” in *Das Geistige Welt, Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens, Gesammelte Schriften* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), vol. V, pp. 4-5.
26. Ibid.
27. Max Frischeisen-Köhler, the historian and progressive Life philosopher, contrasted Dilthey and Nietzsche’s life-philosophy with Kantian metaphysics. See: Max Frischeisen-Köhler, “Wilhelm Dilthey als Philosoph,” in *Logos: Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* 3:1 (1912), pp. 29-58.
28. “[das] Zeitloses . . . wäre dann das, was wir eben nicht erlebten und darum nur Schattenreich.,” *ibid.*
29. Peter Szondi, “Schleiermachers Hermeneutik Heute,” in *Schriften II* (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), pp. 106-30.
30. “Denn gleich mit dem ersten Entwurf zu einem bestimmten Werk entwickelt sich auch in ihm die leitende Gewalt der schon feststehenden Form, sie modifiziert . . . imeinzeln nicht nur den Ausdruck, sondern auch die Erfundung.” *Ibid.*, p. 128.
31. “Hermeneutik, so versatnden, ist ein Insturment der Kritik.” *Ibid.*, p. 130.

32. In 1905, Karl Joël published “Nietzsche and Romanticism,” along with several leaders of neo-Kantianism like the famous historian Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915) and the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936).
33. “Jede Lösung der philosophischen Probleme gehört, geschichtlich angesehen, einer Gegenwart und einer Lage in ihr an: der Mensch, dies Geschöpf der Zeit, hat, solange er in ihr wirkt, darin die Sicherheit seines Daseins, dass er, was er schafft, aus dem Fluss der Zeit heraushebt, als ein Dauerndes.” Wilhelm Dilthey, “Das Wesen der Philosophie,” in *Die geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), p. 364.
34. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, translated by N. M. Paul (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 17.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
37. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 15.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
40. See, for example, the “classical” monographs by Walter Kaufmann as well as the intellectual history of Nietzsche’s reception by Steven Aschheim. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche legacy in Germany, 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
41. Adam Thurschwell, “Specters of Nietzsche: Potential Futures for the Concept of the Political in Agamben and Derrida,” in *Cardozo Law Review* 24:3 (2003), p. 1204.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 1208.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 1210.
44. Adrian del Caro, *Grounding the Nietzsche Rhetoric of Earth* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), p. 405.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 417.
46. Friedrich Balke, “From a Biopolitical Point of View: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Crime,” in *Cardozo Law Review* 24:2 (2003), p. 706.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 714-15.
48. Mark Warren, *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988).
49. Franz Rezenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, translated by Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 17.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2: 1927–1934, edited by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 800.
52. Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, edited by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 314.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

54. Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, edited by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 164.
55. "Das Stück hat in seinem Thema: der ewigen Wiederkunft, zu Nietzsche die merwürdigste Beziehung; eine verborgener und tiefere zu Baudlaire, an den es an eineigen grossartigen Stellen fast wörtlich anklingt." Walter Benjamin to Max Horkheimer, 6 January 1938, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol 6: 1938–1940 (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), p. 10.
56. The George Circle is known today as an avant-garde circle in Munich, which at the beginning of the century recreated the concept of German poetics and had a decisive influence on research in modern German studies. Among this group may be found some of the leading anti-Semites of the twentieth century, as well as Jewish-German artists, important academics, and even famous politicians and military men. In recent years, research on the George Circle has been revived. See: Robert Norton, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and his Circle* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002); Thomas Karlauf, *Stefan George* (Hamburg: Bertelsmann Verlag, 2008); Ulrich Raulff, *Kreis ohne Meister: Stefan Georges Nachleben* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 2009).
57. "Die Tradition der Unterdrückten belehrt uns darüber, dass der 'Ausnahmezustand, in dem wir leben, die Regel ist. Wir müssen zu einem Begriff der Geshichte kommen, der dem entsporcht." Thesis VIII, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte." Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, edited by Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 392.
58. See, for example, Jacob Golomb, "Martin Buber's 'Liberation' from Nietzsche's 'Invasion,'" in *Nietzsche and Zion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 159-88.
59. Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysiticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 15.
60. Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Buber's Rhetoric," in *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 15.
61. Schmuël Hugo Bergman, "Introduction to *I and Thou*," in Martin Buber, *Be'sod Si'ach: Al HaAdam ve'Amidato Nochach Ha'Havaya* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1980), p. 22. [in Hebrew, My translation].
62. *Ibid.*, p .35. [My translation].
63. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 40.
64. I have analyzed elsewhere Buber's interpretation of Carl Schmitt's theory in an article on the "political philosophy" of the "Jerusalem School." See: Nitzan Lebovic, "The Jerusalem School: The Theopolitical Hour," *New German Critique* 105 (2008), pp. 97-120.
65. *Ibid.*
66. Martin Buber, "The Validity and Limitation of the Political Principle," in *Pointing the Way*, edited and translated by Maurice Friedman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), pp. 208-19.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

69. Ibid., p. 215.
70. Ibid., p. 216-17.
71. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum Books, 1998), p. 63.
72. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health: The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, translated by Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 79.
73. Ibid., p. 78.
74. Ibid., p. 79.
75. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 66. The English translation is misleading since it does not distinguish properly between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*—two concepts that mark different and even opposed ways to “experience.” Since Kant, both concepts have usually been translated into English as “experience.”
76. Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*, translated by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 240-41.
77. Ibid., pp. 244-45.
78. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, translated by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 137.
79. Ibid., pp. 139-40.
80. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), p. 317.
81. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, translated by Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2005), p. 27.
82. Ibid., p. 66.
83. Ibid., p. 76.
84. Alain Badiou, *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, translated by Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 68.
85. Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy*, p. 66.
86. Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 4: 763. Translated in: Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 220.
87. Ibid., p. 221.
88. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 11.
89. Ibid., p. 21.
90. “The history of Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution is so tightly woven into the history of Germany between the wars that it is impossible to understand Hitler’s rise to power without first analyzing the uses and abuses of this article in the years between 1919 and 1933.” Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 14.
91. Armin Schäfer, “. . . und das Wort ist Fleisch geworden: Diskurse der Biopolitik,” in *Disziplinen*

des Lebens: Zwischen Anthropologie, Literatur und Politik edited by Ulrich Bröckling and Benjamin Bühler (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004), pp. 325-40.

92. Ibid., p. 326.

93. Ibid., p. 334.

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid., p. 340.

96. Ibid.

97. Karl Jaspers, *Philosophische Autobiographie* [1977] (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1981), p. 68.

