

OTT PUUMEISTER

On Biopolitical Subjectivity:
Michel Foucault's perspective on
biopolitics and its semiotic aspects



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biopolitics and its semiotic aspects



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- I Puumeister, Ott 2014. Biopolitics, Surveillance, and the Subject of ADHD. *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* 202: 301–320.
- II Puumeister, Ott 2016. Why Does ‘Normalization’ Matter to Political Semiotics? In: Bennett, Tyler James; Rodriguez Higuera, Claudio Julio (eds.). *Concepts for Semiotics*. Tartu: Tartu University Press (Tartu Semiotics Library, 16), 123–132.
- III Puumeister, Ott 2018. Surviving Finitude: Survival as a Constructed Foundation of Identity. *Sign Systems Studies* 46(1): 90–116.
- IV Puumeister, Ott; Ventsel, Andreas 2018. Biopolitics Meets Biosemiotics: The Semiotic Threshold(s) of Anti-Aging Interventions. *Theory, Culture & Society* 35(1): 117–139.

INTRODUCTION

The thesis aims to explore the connections between analyses of biopolitics and semiotics. The thesis comprises four original publications and the introductory part which serves as a theoretical and conceptual frame for the individual publications; as such, it is not simply a summary of the arguments made in the articles, but also an attempt to develop them and to provide some indication as to where future research on the topic could be guided.

The term “biopolitics” was first coined in the early twentieth century from the organicist perspective on state and nationhood by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (Esposito 2008: 16–17; Lemke 2011: 9–10). In this context, biology was understood to be a fundamental discipline for the management of the state seen in terms of a form of life. Life acted as the foundation of politics. While organicism fell into disrepute with its genocidal application by Nazi politics and was challenged by the development of genetics, the perspective that biological modeling of behavior should be applied to the analysis of political action is still seen as relevant today (e.g., Hatemi and McDermott 2011).

The thesis adopts a different perspective and positions itself into the critical tradition of the analysis of biopolitics that was proposed in the 1970s by Michel Foucault. He defined biopolitics as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy” (Foucault 2009: 1),¹ and his aim was to understand the governmental logic according to which human biological life is employed in politics and embedded within power relations. The life-as-basis-of-politics perspective here becomes an object of research.

Foucault’s definition of and approach to biopolitics serves as a constant reference point to anyone who does critical analysis of the discourses and mechanisms that articulate life’s connections to politics. The concept has, in the twenty-first century, markedly increased in popularity and it is widely used across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences – to the point that it is exposed to the danger of losing its specificity and becoming a “buzzword” (Lemke 2011: 1). As such, the concept of biopolitics signifies any and all appearance of (biological) life in a political context. It is not surprising, then, that the notion is understood to be losing its analytic value (Campbell 2011: vii). It is thus relevant to go back to Foucault’s original proposals on biopolitics and biopower in order to delimit the concept in a fruitful manner.

The proliferation of the uses of “biopolitics” has no doubt to do with the development of biotechnologies that have the potentiality to intervene in and transform the “natural” processes of life. The approach adopted here, however,

¹ Another, similar, definition of biopolitics by Foucault goes as follows: “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 ...” (2008: 317).

does not, first and foremost, underscore the technological aspects of biopolitics. On the foreground here are rather the semiotic mechanisms through which the connections between life and politics are articulated. Now, while Foucault's approach to power as immanent to social relations has been largely influential in the development of semiotics of power (Selg and Ventsel 2008) and, more generally, to the cultural turn in social sciences (Nash 2001), especially since it stresses the freedom and active participation of the subject in mechanisms of power, a participation through which the individual is constituted as a social subject, the concept of biopolitics has not gained much attention in the context of semiotics. This might be due to the presupposition that biopolitics somehow takes immediate control of life, without any semiotic mediation. In this scenario, biopolitics would signify the direct intervention in the processes of life via technology or sovereign violence. Quite a few thinkers have the tendency to forego the dimension of freedom in the context of biopolitics that is often viewed as reducing human beings to a state of mere animality and survival. Such is the view of Hannah Arendt (1998[1958]) and Giorgio Agamben (1998) with whom the Foucauldian understanding of biopolitics is, in this thesis, put into critical dialogue.

In order to argue for the semiotic aspects in Foucault's approach to biopolitics, it is necessary to position the latter into the more general framework of his conceptualization of power. In this way, it is possible to show that biopolitics also operates primarily through subjectification – that is, through making possible certain delimited ways of being in a society thus enabling individuals to constitute themselves as social subjects. The main proposal put forth in the thesis is that biopolitics is subjectification, that is, the delimitation and possibilization of ways of subjectivation.² This does not signify individuals' direct subjection to power, but always entails semiotic mediation. Foucault's general approach to power relations is the focus of the first chapter.

The second chapter shall move on specifically to biopolitics seen from the perspective of subjectification that is conceptualized in terms of normalization taking place in dispositives of power. Employing Foucault's concept of the dispositive – a network of heterogeneous elements deployed to some strategic ends (Foucault 1980b: 194–195) – enables us to treat normalization not as a simple process of objectification of individuals' lives, but rather to stress that normalization entails the structuration of semiotic relations within the social milieu. Here, it becomes fruitful to think of the dispositive in terms of the social *umwelt* in order to highlight the subjective dimension at work in biopolitical normalization. In turn, thinking of Jakob von Uexküll's (1926; 1957[1934]; 1982[1940]) concept of *umwelt* from the biopolitical perspective enables us to decenter the subject as the source of all meaning. Instead, strategies and

² The process of subjectification refers to the ways in which subjects are made knowable and controllable, that is, normalized, while subjectivation refers to the modes through which these objectifications are put to use in the construction of social subjectivity by human beings turning themselves into subjects.

discourses of power have an integral part to play in the construction of human subjective universes. Viewed through this lens, normalization does not appear as direct intervention into life, but as prescription on subjective normativity, to use Georges Canguilhem's terms.

The third chapter provides a discussion on subjectivity and freedom in the context of biopolitics and steps into dialogue with Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben, both of whom understand biopolitics as the reduction of human beings to a less-than-human condition and of human lives to a state of mere survival. The chapter argues that adopting a Foucauldian perspective does not necessitate that the analysis of biopolitics should be done in terms of reduction, but rather of subjectification. While Arendt's and Agamben's conceptualization is totalizing in its view of biopolitics as a nearly all-encompassing event of modernity, Foucault's view of specific strategies of power in dispositives enables us to stress the importance of resistance and agency in the context of power relations. Resistance is a constitutive dimension of power relations and is not to be thought as an escape from power. It is hoped that with the first three chapters the view of biopolitics as a strategy of power operating through semiotic means and thus allowing for a dimension of freedom and agency is sufficiently argued for.

The fourth and final chapter of the introductory part of the thesis shall then present a problematization of two biosemiotic concepts – namely, the semiotic threshold and *umwelt* – from the perspective of biopolitical critique. This is done in order to demonstrate the ambiguous nature of the models from the life sciences – of which biosemiotics purports itself to be the redefining discipline – when applied to the conceptualization of politics. These ambiguities should remind us of the dangers of using biological metaphors in order to understand politics.

1. POWER AND SUBJECTIVITY: THE SOCIAL SEMIOTICS OF MICHEL FOUCAULT

Michel Foucault has been described by Gilles Deleuze as a “seismic” thinker, or in other words, one that proceeds “by crises or quakes” (2006: 338). These ruptures in Foucault’s work are evident: in the 1960s he analyzed the discursive formation of knowledge, from the mid-1970s onwards he concentrated on the dispositives of power, and from the start of the 1980s until his death in 1984 he thought how a history of subjectivity – or ethics – could be conceptualized. The disruptions, however, are perhaps not so strong as they might seem at first glance: the workings of power are evident in the knowledge of mental illness as analyzed in *The History of Madness* (2006a [1961]), just as the notion of subjectivity is present in the analysis of the dispositive of sexuality in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978). Indeed, looking back on his work at the beginning of the 1980s, Foucault stated that its running thread had been that of the subject: “My objective [...] has been to create a history of different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (1982: 777). Posed in this way, it is clear that the subject cannot be thought outside neither knowledge nor power; instead, the subject is always constructed within the context of power/knowledge. Put differently, there can be no pure philosophy of the subject.

The aim of this chapter is to draw out the semiotic implications of Foucault’s understanding of power and power relations and examine how the notion of the subject might be conceptualized in their context. Since the interest of this thesis is to conceptualize the way in which biopolitical subjectivity is constructed, it is first necessary to understand from which perspective subjectivity is understood – a semiotically informed Foucauldian approach serves here as a starting point.

Although Foucault relates himself to semiotics only through the semiological and structuralist tradition, and thus understands it as the study of “the structure of communication” (1980a: 114) or “relations of signification” as separate from power relations (1982: 778), it is without doubt that a large part of his social analysis deals exactly with the creation of possibilities of and constraints on meaning-making. It is perhaps simply a case of the semiotic threshold, a question of which relations and phenomena to understand as participating in semiosis. It is my view that when Foucault speaks of power relations, we can interpret them as semiotic relations by focusing on the subjectifying aspect of power. A relation of power can thus be conceptualized as impelling a certain type of self-description, that is, as a prescription on how an individual should transform him or herself into a social subject. In short, a relation of power does not have immediate, unmediated and automatic effects, but it opens up a possible field for subjectivation.

1.1. The power of truth: power in discourse

Let us firstly consider the most clear and obvious link that Michel Foucault has with semiotics, namely his understanding of discourse and the mechanisms of power immanent to discourse.³ While the notion of power was not explicitly conceptualized in Foucault's work before the 1970s, his earlier work on the formations of knowledge in Western society always in some way or other already implicated power as operative within the construction of knowledge. *History of Madness* (2006a), first published in 1961, for example, dealt with the problem of how knowledge of mental illness formed in the nineteenth century enabled the internment and exclusion of certain kinds of people from the "normal" people endowed with healthy rationality. This was further examined in the 1973–74 and 1974–75 lecture courses held at the Collège de France, entitled *Psychiatric Power* (2006b) and *Abnormal* (2003b).

One of the underlying themes that tie knowledge to power is that of the constitution of subjectivity, that is, of making possible certain ways of being in a given society through formations of knowledge. Thus, the 1963 book *The Birth of the Clinic* (2003) examines the role of medical perception in the constitution of the human being as a finite subject, a topic expanded upon and revised in *The Order of Things* (2002) three years later. In the latter, Foucault studies how the modern formation of knowledge – *episteme* – constitutes "Man" as an empirico-transcendental doublet. It is thus the semiotic system of knowledge which makes possible ways of being in a society.⁴

One might ask, however, why is the definition of ways of being necessarily connected to power. One of the principal discursive operators of power is identified by Foucault as "the will to truth" (1972: 218), or in other words, how a discursive field within which true and false statements are recognizable is constituted. Furthermore, "a whole teratology of learning" (*ibid.*, 223) is created which is not recognized within this discursive field as neither true nor false – it remains simply meaningless, without value. If we follow Foucault's understanding that the formation of knowledge dominant in a society constitutes possible ways of being within that society, then we can certainly agree that the "political question [...] is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself" (Foucault 1980a: 133).⁵ Each society has its own "regime of truth" that prescribes the ways in which and by whom truth can be uttered (*ibid.*, 131). Truth is immanent to the system of knowledge of a society. What statements can be recognized as having a truth value, about what and whom can truth be uttered, and who can be recognized as the speaker of truth are outcomes

³ Foucault's influences can clearly be sensed in Selg and Ventsel's (2008; 2010) approach to semiotics of power in which they conceptualize power as operating through discourse.

⁴ It is worth mentioning that Lotman and Uspensky refer to *The Order of Things* regarding the typology of culture by stressing how Foucault examines "the connection between cultural evolution and the change in relation to the sign" (1978: 230).

⁵ On the relations of Foucault to the Frankfurt School's analyses of ideology, deception, alienation, see McCarthy (1990).

of the construction of knowledge.⁶ Truth is thus not a matter of correspondence between propositions and the world – a statement can be said to be true or false only within the historical and contingent complex of power/knowledge.⁷

Consequently, the question becomes, how must one construct oneself as a social subject in order to become a “true” subject, one that constructs itself according to those knowledges that speak the truth of subjectivity and through which one is able to express truth about him or herself.⁸ In a regime of truth, individuals’ choices of how to construct oneself as a social subject are delimited, they are impelled to adopt a certain kind of self-description (such as psychiatric, psychological, economic, etc.). The power of truth, then, is to be viewed positively as that which prescribes possible ways of being, makes it possible for an individual to subjectivize oneself, but that at the same time delimits and defines the possibilities of self-construction.

Discursive knowledge does not, consequently, have a merely epistemological dimension. Instead, one might say that discourses construct the very social reality that individuals inhabit as subjects. That is, knowledge works also – and perhaps more importantly – on the ontological level, constituting reality and the beings inhabiting it. This ontology cannot, of course, be the metaphysical theory that understands being as a (stable) ground from which beings can emerge. Foucault speaks rather of “historical ontology” (1984a: 45–46; 1984b: 351), of the way that subjectivities and societies are historically constructed. It is in this context that Foucault can state in *The Order of Things* that “[b]efore the end of the eighteenth century, *man* did not exist” (2002: 336). This does not mean anything as absurd as “human beings did not exist,” but that the figure of the human being familiar to us was historically constructed within the framework of the human sciences. The human being as both a subject and an object to itself – the empirico-transcendental doublet – is a historical being. This, however, does not make “man” any less real, does not make this figure into an ideological illusion, but instead constitutes a prism through which the truth of human beings can be uttered.

While Foucault did not elaborate the theme of historical ontology in any greater depth other than to suggest that his work on knowledge, power, and

⁶ As Paul Veyne says, “one can only speak truly by virtue of the force of the rules imposed at one time or another by a history whose individuals are at once, and mutually, actors and victims. Thus by truths we do not mean true propositions to be discovered or accepted but the set of rules that make it possible to utter and to recognize those propositions held as true” (1993: 3).

⁷ In Richard Rorty’s terms we can say that the truth is not “out there” but instead is constructed in our descriptions of the world: “The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot” (1989: 5).

⁸ This is the problem of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1978): not that sex was used to repress, but that a certain discourse of desire and confession was formed that claimed to speak the very truth of subjectivity. Sexuality was constructed as that through which one could understand the subject.

ethics could be read in the vein of “a historical ontology of ourselves”,⁹ the theme of ontology is taken up by Ian Hacking who says that “we are concerned, in the end, with possible ways to be a person” (2002: 2). Hacking sees the problem of “making up people” through naming and categorization as ontological questions that construct general kinds to which individuals have to respond in one way or another; by identification or rejection – but if a category has been institutionalized and rendered “true”, then it cannot be simply ignored. For example, since the nineteenth century, one has the *possibility*, but also sometimes the *demand* to adopt the descriptor of “pervert”, while before no such possibility – no matter how perversely one behaved – existed (see also Davidson 1987). This is the ontological aspect at play here: each discursive formation constructs its own object of knowledge (Foucault 1972: ch. 3), and when the object of knowledge is a certain aspect of the human being, the knowledge of this object becomes a prescription for subjectivation. As much as knowledge is historical, so are also the subjects and objects that know and are known.¹⁰

The dynamic between naming, categorization, labeling and subjectivation according to those categories, names, labels that carry with them certain knowledges is called by Hacking “dynamic nominalism”. Where classical nominalism holds that it is solely our given names that create classes of beings in the world, dynamic nominalism holds that a certain response from those named is necessary. Only with a self-descriptive response from individuals according to invented categories is it possible to state that “a kind of person” comes “into being at the same time as the kind itself” is invented (Hacking 2002: 106). Of course, not all objects created by and in knowledge are capable of response, only those – namely, humans – who are capable of speaking the same language as that knowledge. For example, we cannot state that our knowledge of germs creates them; our description does not affect them in the least bit, only when other (technical) measures of action are taken in accordance with our descriptions, does our knowledge begin to affect the behavior of germs. When categories of people are invented, however, new “possibilities for personhood” are simultaneously constructed (ibid., 110).

The power operating through and within a regime of truth should be understood exactly in terms of possibilization, a simultaneous opening up and delimiting, and thus not in terms of simple restriction and one-way determination. This is exactly the positivity of power in discourse: it prescribes possible fields of choices. On the one hand, individuals are rendered manageable and governable as objects of knowledge (the process of subjectification), but on the

⁹ “Three domains of genealogy are possible. First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents” (Foucault 1984b: 351).

¹⁰ On this point see also Annemarie Mol’s discussion of “ontological politics”, albeit from the perspective of actor network theory (1999).

other hand, individuals are constantly transforming themselves into subjects (the process of subjectivation) by (re)interpreting, reimagining the prescribed ways of being in the world. We can then speak of a constant process of subjectivation within the context of the complex of power/knowledge, but not of a fixed and determined subject.

When Alan Schrift writes that “Foucault left to us the task of thinking a notion of a subject that is both autonomous and disciplined, both actively self-forming and passively self-constructed [...]” (1997: 156), he is to my mind correct in not choosing between the two alternatives, since this would amount to reducing Foucault’s thought either to a philosophy of agency as opposed to power or to a reflection of subjective helplessness in the face of an almighty power. As will become clear shortly, when we now turn to Foucault’s explicit conceptualization of power relations, subjectivity should indeed be thought within this ambiguity of self-construction and constitution from without, of subjectivation and subjectification. And this ambiguity inherent in Foucault’s analysis of power relations leads us to conclude, in the end, that Foucault’s notion of subjectivity is extremely close to that of a semiotic subjectivity as a constant process and dynamic of internalization and externalization.

1.2. Relations of power and subjectivity

Moving on from discourse and discursive formations to relations of power, we are confronted with the following statement that makes it rather difficult to conceptualize Foucault’s understanding of power in semiotic terms: “The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of language: relations of power, not relations of meaning” (Foucault 1980a: 114). He seems to exclude power from meaning and meaning from power.

However, we need to remember, firstly, that when Foucault separates both the study of “the structure of communication” (ibid.) and of “relations of signification” (1982: 778) from the study of power relations, he does this on the background of Saussurean semiology, the dominant school of semiotics in France at that time, which sought, in its analyses of society, to reconstruct an underlying differential structure of meaning – on the basis of linguistic models – based on which it would be possible to describe the emergence of individual social facts. Foucault, however, already in his conceptualization of discursive formations in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, sought to overcome the distinction of a transcendental *langue* from an empirical *parole*¹¹ by stating that the rules ordering the dispersion of statements are not separable from the utterance of statements. Rules are immanent to the statements. And when it is understood that the rules are immanent to the practice of discourse – to utterances about the world – we need to account for the non-discursive relations at play, such as disciplinary norms, institutional constraints, economic factors, etc. (Foucault

¹¹ On this distinction see Saussure (2011[1916]); Barthes (1977[1964]).

1972: 45). Foucault sought to analyze discourse as practice¹² through which the very conditions of what is sayable and of what nothing cannot be said are established (ibid., 46).¹³ It is necessary to take account of the social relations, norms, institutions, etc. within, through, and according to which discourse is practiced. Thus, when Foucault distances himself from structural semiology, perhaps unbeknownst to him, he moves closer to a constructivist sociosemiotics which deals exactly with the constitution of social reality as interactive and signification practice (in the vein of, for example, Berger and Luckmann 1991[1966]; Randviir 2004).

Secondly, when we read on, it becomes clear on which terms Foucault separates power from meaning in history. He states: “History has no ‘meaning’, though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent” (1980a: 114). In this statement, Foucault’s approach to history is evidently Nietzschean in that he denies any kind of transcendental, ahistorical, and totalizing meaning to the progress of historical events, and instead holds that the meaning inscribed to history and within history is itself historical, a result of historical interpretations.¹⁴ This stance is furthermore expressed in Foucault’s methodological choice in approaching social phenomena as historical, namely that of genealogy. The task of the genealogist is not to constitute the ultimate meaning, to discover the origin, but to uncover the mechanisms that are hidden by the apparently final, closed meaning of a phenomenon or an event. Genealogy is “to identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things which continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being lies not at the root of what we know and what we are but the exteriority of accidents” (Foucault 2000b: 374). In other words, doing genealogy means to identify those contingencies behind the construction of phenomena that we now take for granted. It is to transform seeming necessities into contingent events, which is why Foucault has also used here the term

¹² Félix Guattari underlines this aspect in Foucault’s analysis of discourse through the notion of statement which, “for Foucault, no longer functions on the authority of a segment of a universal logos leveling out existential contingencies. Its proper domain is therefore no longer simply that of a relation of signification, articulating the relationship between signifier and signified, nor of the relation of the denotation of a referent. For it is also a capacity of *existential production* [...]. In its mode of being singular, the Foucauldian statement is neither quite linguistic, nor exclusively material” (Guattari 1996: 178, original italics).

¹³ This is not to deny that Foucault’s earlier work – such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things* – sought precisely to bring out the systematicity and structure of knowledge. However, when moving away from the archaeological method (and already *The Archaeology of Knowledge* can be seen as a farewell to archaeology) and towards genealogy, it becomes clear that discursive formations are not to be thought as structures standing apart or above practice.

¹⁴ There “is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, for after all everything is already interpretation, each sign is in itself not the thing that offers itself to interpretation but an interpretation of other signs” (Foucault 2000a: 275). On the role of Nietzsche in Foucault’s genealogical method see also Mahon (1992).

“eventalization” that refers to the rediscovery of the “connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies, and so on that at a given moment establish what subsequently comes to count as being self-evident, universal and necessary” (cited in Olssen 1999: 62). It can be said that here, too, in the rejection of the “meaning of history” and in the method of genealogy, Foucault radiates social constructivist tones in that he rejects social-historical phenomena as self-evident and self-explanatory, but instead in need of deconstruction.

Thus, if we look at Foucault’s separation between meaning and power, structures of communication and power relations from the perspective of socio-semiotics, we discover that there is, in fact, no basis for this distinction, at least in so far as Foucault understands power as constituting possible trajectories for subjectivation. This becomes evident in his treatment of power relations as immanent in the social network: “Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter” (Foucault 1978: 94). Here Foucault also acknowledges that power relations cannot be separated from relations, patterns, and structures of communication (be they economic, familial, sexual, etc.).¹⁵ When power is understood as immanent to social relations it is easy to understand what exactly is meant by the productive nature of power: it is not something that prohibits from without or from above, but that, through inequalities inherent in social relations, constitutes positions in social relations from which individuals may act and within which they can assume the role of the speaker, that is, an author of uttered statements.¹⁶ And this is why it is also necessary to stress that “power comes from below” (ibid.) – relations of power are constantly (re)produced in social interaction, in everyday *praxis*.

It is here that power relations can be said to be constitutive in the full sense of the word: individuals are able to transform themselves into social subjects within the social field crossed by power relations. In this sense, power relations are constitutive of subjects. Whether it is a domain of knowledge or a social institution (e.g., a family, a school, etc.), a certain type of subjectivity is required in order for one to acquire the right to speak or the position to act. An individual must construct oneself in a certain way in order to participate in social interaction. Thus a history of subjectivity according to different networks of relations becomes possible. In the beginning of the 1980s, Foucault stated that, indeed, the primary objective of his work has not been neither knowledge

¹⁵ Directly connected to this realization that power is immanent to social relations is the cultural turn in social theory that stresses the importance of meaning and communication in the analysis of power, which is seen as operating through the production of signification as well as the structures of institutions and hierarchies in society (see Nash 2001).

¹⁶ Foucault is thus directly opposed to the liberal view of power according to which the individual stands opposed to power and the latter simply restricts his or her actions or makes him or her behave in a way that s/he otherwise would not (see Selg and Ventsel 2008: 172).

nor power, but “to create a history of different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (1982: 777). Although Foucault differentiates the technologies of the self (or the ways in which an individual transforms him or herself into a subject) from the technologies of production, of sign systems, and of power (1988: 18), it is important to understand that they do not operate in isolation from each other, but should, again, be understood as coexistent and complementary. Technologies of the self cannot be conceived without technologies of power and knowledge since the former necessarily make use of the discourses that (at least claim to) speak the truth of subjectivity, express the truth of what it means to construct oneself as a self: “Truth is above all a system of obligations” (Foucault 2017: 12). However, with the notion of technologies of the self, Foucault directs us to the ambiguity already noted in the constitution of social subjectivity, namely that we have to take into account both active subjectivation and techniques of subjectification in the constitution of subjectivity. There can be no total and final liberation from government, just as there cannot be a total control of the subject. This ambiguity, a dynamic of government and freedom, is noted by Foucault in “The Subject and Power” in which he writes:

[W]hat defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future. [...] a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that “the other” [...] be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible inventions may open up. (1982: 789)

A relation of power thus entails, at least to a certain degree, freedom, a possibility of reaction and a delimitation of responses; a simultaneous possibilization and limitation. Freedom is not here to be thought in the sense of an inherent capacity of the subject as that who would, by its nature, resist power, but in the context of a specific network of power relations that does not determine all possible routes of action. A relation of power presupposes the possibility of choice. And this is exactly how Foucault understands the general notion of government, as the structuration of “the possible field of action of others” (ibid., 790). Government is an activity of structuration and not necessarily of repression.¹⁷ Government is the putting into play of a network of power relations within which an individual can render itself into a social subject.

¹⁷ Nikolas Rose (1999) has spoken in this context of how power, in fact, produces freedom. Of course, the freedom produced by power is delimited to “proper” behavior and “reasonable” choices, etc., but nevertheless we should take into account that power and freedom are not contradictory, but instead, the former can operate through the latter (see also Lemke 2012).

A history, or a genealogy of the subject can thus be written from the perspective of the complex of power/knowledge while not assuming that the subject is simply rendered into a passive object to be acted upon. If one does not take the subject as something pre-existing the social field of relations, but instead as something constituted within it, we do not have to assume the inherently violent and abusive nature of power. To govern means to conduct the conduct of individuals, that is, to shape the way in which their self-construction is conducted. Power, while being immanent to social relations, institutions, structures, is always at the same time mediated by those relations, institutions, structures that are, at their core, constructing social reality as meaningful reality – a semiotic reality. Thus it is not contradictory to state that the subjectivity Foucault is talking about is very close to semiotic subjectivity in the case of George Herbert Mead who understands the construction of the self similarly in a relational manner, as the constant internalization of social relations and projection of expectations to the social field (1925). To speak in Mead's terms, the construction of the social self means to render oneself into an object ("me") to oneself (1913) in the same terms as those according to which truthful knowledge of individuals is constructed. That is, a "self" in Mead's terms or a "subject" in Foucault's cannot be conceived apart from social relations to which power is an immanent and constitutive factor.

The Foucauldian view on subjectivity and government presumes that the governed subjects construct themselves in a way that would render them governable. Or in Hacking's terms, that individuals would respond to the categories invented to label people in such a way as to verify the reality of those categories. The construction of subjectivity is thus a semiotic process of self-government, of self-description according to an invented or socially constructed reality, and thus it is compatible with Juri Lotman's realization that the self is a continuous auto-communicative process (1990).

Thus, in analyzing the government of individuals, the self-description of individuals within the network of power is as important as the mechanisms of power used to govern as it reveals the process of social subjectivation in the context of government and power relations and how ways of being in society are (re)produced. The main takeaway is to understand subjectivity as constructed in communication and meaning-making practices. Semiotics does not, in any way, understand the construction of subjectivity as isolated from power and knowledge but instead sees the subject as dependent on cultural codes, social norms, social interactions, etc. Both the Foucauldian and the semiotic perspective on subjectivity sees it not as a starting point, and origin of meaning, but instead as a problem: how is the (individual or collective) subject¹⁸ constructed

¹⁸ The notion of the subject should not be limited strictly to individual human beings. A collective (e.g., a population, a nation, a subculture, etc.) can as well be thought as a trans-individual subject. We should instead employ the concept of the semiotic subject. According to Randviir, "Semiotic subjects can be understood as semiotically bordered (semiotically distinct) and semiotically active physical organisms or conditionally distinct organisms" (2007: 143). The boundaries of the subject are not drawn physically, but on the basis of (to a

in a culture, in a society, and through politics? It is more pertinent, then, to speak of the process of subjectivation than of the subject – the latter is always the result or, better, the temporarily fixed point of a process of ongoing construction.

There is, however, an important discrepancy between a Foucauldian and a semiotic approach to conceptualizing the subject. While Foucault theorizes subjectivity from a genealogical perspective and asks how the subject is historically constructed in the context of power and knowledge, a semiotic theory of subjectivity instead attempts to provide abstract models to analyze the semiotic logic of subjectivation. It would seem, then, that by employing semiotic theories of subjectivity – or in other words, the self – as applicable to Foucault’s historical analyses we are in danger of reducing Foucault to what he was trying to escape, namely, to a philosophy of subjectivity. Are not semiotic models of subjectivity contravening the following demand voiced by Foucault?

One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history. (1980a: 117)

Applying abstract semiotic models to Foucault’s analyses of the construction and constitution of subjectivity, we need to, first and foremost, answer the question, what do these models represent – do they present to us a fixed form of the subject or do they allow us to consider the general capacity for subjectivation? My interpretation tends to choose for the latter perspective. Since semiotics deals with subjectivity always in the context of a specific society, culture, or environment,¹⁹ it cannot pose anything like a “founding subject”²⁰ standing outside and apart from its sociocultural context. This understanding is stressed by Lotman who states that individuality “is not primary or self-evident but depends on the means of encoding” (1990: 234). Similarly to Foucault, then, Lotman treats the subject as an outcome of social interaction and as constructed

certain extent) unified patterns of meaning-making. In this sense, the individual organism is always already a multiplicity – a product of unification of varying semiotic processes.

¹⁹ Already from William James (1890) and George Herbert Mead (1913; 1925; 1972 [1934]) onwards, the “self” is always a social self and cannot be thought in terms of the individual opposing society (see also Wiley 1994).

²⁰ In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970, Foucault analyzed the notion of the “founding subject” as one of the ways in which the reality of discourse is elided: “The task of the founding subject is to animate the empty forms of language with his objectives; through the thickness and inertia of empty things, he grasps intuitively the meanings lying within them” (1972: 227). The founding subject, then, is someone capable of giving meaning, while not himself being subject to the effects of meaning-making.

through sociocultural codes: “a personality may be thought of as an individual set of socially significant codes” (Lotman 1990: 22).

Consequently, semiotic models of subjectivity are not to be seen as contradictory to Foucault’s genealogy, but instead as complementary to it. In what sense exactly? They enable us to trace the semiotic logic of historical constructions of the subject. For example, in the article “Surviving Finitude: Survival as a Constructed Foundation of Identity” (publication III), Lotman’s notion of auto-communication was used to trace the semiotic logic behind the construction of the Estonian nation as a subject turned towards death, as a semiotic subject that is founded upon the constructed drive to persist in its sameness. Analyzing this socioculturally constructed need for survival based on auto-communicational mechanisms enabled us, in addition to its historically specific outlines, to draw out its semiotic mechanism which consisted in the constant reiteration of the need for survival of the Estonian nation and not primarily in any positive constructions of identity. Security of life dominated over the construction of culture. In this type of identity construction, auto-communicational repetition of messages seen as crucial for the persistence of the collective self dominates over the communication with the (social, cultural, political) other, and thus the process of self-formation tends to become enclosed and potentially hostile to otherness. Such public discourse of national identity acts as one possible trajectory for the social subjectivation of individuals, as a possible way to become “Estonian” – if not the “true” way of becoming an “Estonian”. In short, the Foucauldian approach to trace the ways in which social subject positions are made possible in public discourse was complemented with an analysis based on Lotman’s model of auto-communicational self-construction, the latter providing the possibility to elaborate the structural logic of meaning making.

Lotman’s model of auto-communication thus does not present us with a ready-made subjectivity, but simply underlines the semiotic capacity for subjectivation that in specific historical situations is always realized in different ways. While Foucault’s approach enables us to stress the historicity of any kind of subjectivation, Lotman’s modeling of subjectivity helps us to see which semiotic mechanisms and communicational channels are employed.

Moving forward in the next chapter to the conceptualization of biopolitics, we will have to keep in mind what has been stated above. Namely, that power, for Foucault, is not describable neither as violence nor in terms of causal relations necessitating certain actions. In order to draw out the semiotic aspects of biopolitics, it will have to be conceptualized in terms of the processes of subjectivation and subjectification. The question we will have to answer in the next chapter is, consequently, what type of subjects does biopolitics make possible? What are the constraints on social subjectivity set by biopolitics? In order to answer these questions, let us turn to Foucault’s concept of dispositive.

2. BIOPOLITICAL DISPOSITIVES

The aim of this chapter is to provide a semiotic conceptualization of biopolitics. The main concept used to attain this goal is that of the dispositive. When Foucault shifted his focus from formations of knowledge to power (relations), he began using the concept of dispositive instead of discourse or discursive formation since the former comprises not only the relations between linguistic statements, but also the material, spatial, visible elements and their relations with what is sayable. Dispositive enables him to analyze the ordering of social fields in which individuals act and behave. In dispositives,²¹ knowledge is put to work and its circulation made possible.

The article “Why Does ‘Normalization’ Matter to Political Semiotics?” (publication II) proposes that biopolitical dispositives are characterizable as those which have a fundamentally normalizing function. This proposal follows from Foucault’s analysis of the dispositive of security²² within which the population emerged as a biopolitical subject-object (2009). In the context of the dispositive of security, Foucault speaks of a specific type of normalization distinct from the normative aspects of both sovereign power and disciplinary power. The type of normalization characteristic of the dispositive of security attempts to detect and discover the normal and deduce the norm from “an interplay of differential normalities” (Foucault 2009: 63). The population as a subject-object of biopolitics emerges as a natural phenomenon with its intrinsic norms that government will have to take into account.

The chapter will firstly and very briefly attempt to summarize what Foucault meant when he spoke of biopolitics. Secondly, it will turn to the notion of dispositive in the context of biopolitics and elaborate on its specifically semiotic aspects – most importantly, in connection with Jakob von Uexküll’s concept *umwelt*. Next, the interplay between normalization and normativity is considered as crucial for understanding the biopolitical context. Georges Canguilhem’s thought is employed in order to conceptualize the figure of life present in Foucauldian biopolitics. And lastly, it will take a look at how the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben reinterprets Foucault’s concept of the dispositive by stressing the aspect of desubjectification which enables to take control of the lives of living beings.

²¹ The singular “dispositive” refers to the concept. However, when speaking of the object level – social relations, discourses, interactions –, it is more suitable to speak of plural “dispositives”, since a society can never be reduced to the operation of a single dispositive of power.

²² The dispositive of security is, for Foucault, one of three – along with law and discipline – “dispositional prototypes” which “can be regarded as major formations of social technologies, each characterized by a particular mode of distribution, as they deal with the surrounding world and organize human interaction an social relations within this framework” (Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer, Thaning 2014: 13). The dispositive of security is thus that organizing principle of social relations to which local dispositives always refer; it is, consequently, a meta-construction postulated by Foucault in order to analyze the logic of local power relations.

2.1. What is biopolitics?

The question – what do we mean when we speak of biopolitics? – has been touched upon in all the papers included in this thesis. Nevertheless it is important to summarize, reiterate and elaborate upon the use of concepts, since similarly to Foucault, my own articles have not made exactly clear the difference between *biopower* and *biopolitics*, sometimes using the terms synonymously.

The article “Biopolitics, Surveillance, and the Subject of ADHD” (publication I) employs David Hook’s (2010) distinction between biopolitics and biopower, the former understood as a variant of the generic category of the latter.²³ Biopolitics is “that type of bio-power that targets collectivities, constituting its subjects as “a people,” “a nation,” “a race” [...]”; furthermore, “whereas bio-power begins with the body and its potentials, and seizes life and “living being” as its objects, bio-politics is always necessarily a form of government, it involves a government–population–political economy relationship [...]” (Hook 2010: 227). This distinction clearly springs from Foucault’s definitions of *biopolitics of the population* and *anatomo-politics of the human body*, the former signifying the government of multiplicities of individuals understood as populations and the latter meaning bodily disciplines (1978: 139; 2003c: 243).

While this is a useful distinction, it has its limits. Defining biopower and biopolitics in this manner, we will run into the danger of understanding the individual subject as separate from the constructions of collectivities. It is justified to speak of different technologies of normalization in the disciplines and in the dispositives of security, but this does not mean that we should speak of their objects of normalization as either individual or collective. Foucault himself emphasizes this point regarding disciplines by stating that “the individual is not the primary datum on which discipline is exercised. [...] The individual is much more a particular way of dividing up the multiplicity for a discipline than the raw material from which it is constructed” (2009: 12). Further down he explicitly says that “sovereignty and discipline, as well as security, can only be concerned with multiplicities” (ibid.). We must again state that the individual subject is rather a result of technologies of power than its starting point. The fundamental point to note is that any aspects of the human being’s life, as s/he is captured in dispositives of power, are rendered political. Politics should here be understood in the sense of Bruno Latour as the “progressive composition of collective life” (2005: 40–41), or in other words, as a practice through which collectivities and individuals belonging to these collectivities are constructed.

This kind of processual understanding of politics shows how we can move beyond the distinction between anatomo-politics focusing on individual bodies

²³ Roberto Esposito (2008) defines the terms according to a different logic. For him, biopower designates the power over life, while biopolitics signifies the positive power of life (power and capacity immanent in life) (see also Puumeister 2012b). To discuss this with some justice would require a separate article, thus I will simply mention the fact that the logic focused on in the introductory part is not the only possible one.

and biopolitics focusing on collectivities. Furthermore, it implies that we should take the term “biopolitics” as the generic term. If we take normalization to be the fundamental function of biopolitics, we can provide its operational definition as *a politics that constructs social relations and that constructs individuals and collectivities on the basis of normalization*. That is, in the context of biopolitics, collectivities are formed and delimited according to normalized and, perhaps even more fundamentally, normalizable²⁴ ways of life. Thus we can speak of collectivities delimited according to age, gender, mental or physical health or disorders, etc. These type of collectivities are not formed based directly on social relations, but within a dispositive of power that constructs possibilities for subjectivation in a social field. Subjects are put in relations to each other according to normalized ways of life. And this is the meaning of the statement that biopolitics renders aspects of life political – any bodily or mental²⁵ feature (for example, a deformity or intelligence quotient) can become the basis for a social way of life, a normalized manner of existence. In summary, then, the thesis proposes that biopolitics should be used as the generic term since it signifies the politicization of life in its biological aspects.

Now, regarding the emergence of biopower, Foucault writes that knowledge/power has become “an agent of transformation of human life” (1978: 143). This statement could be interpreted as underscoring the determining nature of power over the lives of human beings. However, if we understand biopolitics in the more general framework of Foucault’s conception of power relations that was delineated in the previous chapter, we should resist this kind of unilateral interpretation. When Foucault states that with biopower, “the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy,” (2009: 1), it should not be taken to mean a process of mere objectification of life, but instead the process through which “the basic biological features” were put into play as important or even crucial for the construction of social relations and subjects. The argument of the thesis is that the Foucauldian understanding of biopower and -politics enables us to conceptualize the capture of life in dispositives of power in a way that retains the agency and freedom of the process of subjectivation. This is another advantage of using the term

²⁴ The abnormal and “pathological” ways of being and behavior are the ones of which positive knowledge is often formed, leaving the “normal” undefined. Thus, what is known and defined, is the “abnormal” – that which is to be corrected and normalized. See, for example, Ian Hacking’s book *The Taming of Chance* on statistical normalization in the nineteenth century where he writes: “Most of the law-like regularities were first perceived in connection with deviancy: suicide, crime, vagrancy, madness, prostitution, disease. This fact is instructive. It is now common to speak of information and control as a neutral term embracing decision theory, operations research, risk analysis and the broader but less well specified domains of statistical inference. We shall find that the roots of the idea lie in the notion that one can improve – control – a deviant subpopulation by enumeration and classification” (Hacking 1990: 3).

²⁵ Although Byung-Chul Han (2017) has argued that when it comes to the control of mental features, we should already speak of “psychopolitics” instead of “biopolitics”, I will not pursue this line of thought here as it would require an extensive analysis in itself.

biopolitics as the more generic one, since it stresses the political nature of the life of humans as living beings – to live means to participate in interaction, in communal action; in short, to live signifies socialization and the construction of social relations. The (biological) life of living beings is thus not to be understood as a mere object of power, but also as the basis upon which social relations can be constructed. The concept that enables us to highlight this dual nature of biopolitics – simultaneous subjectification and subjectivation –, is the dispositive, to which we now turn.

2.2. What is a dispositive?

The notion of dispositive helps us to conceptualize biopolitics from a semiotic perspective, highlighting the processual nature of biopolitics involving not only government from above, but the active participation of individuals in relations of power through practices of self-government. While in the articles I have limited myself strictly to Foucault's understanding of the term, here I will attempt to elaborate on the concept by using also a few of his interpreters.

Dispositive²⁶ is a concept that Foucault began using when a shift in his work from the analysis of knowledge to the relations of power occurred. In short, it can be understood as an arrangement of power relations deployed to some strategic end. Since Foucault never gave a succinct definition, it is worth quoting a rather long passage from an interview in which he explains what he means by the concept:

What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. [...] Thirdly, I understand by the term 'apparatus' a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. (Foucault 1980b: 194–195, original italics)

²⁶ The French word for the concept is *dispositif*, which is commonly translated as “apparatus” and sometimes as well as “deployment”. In the introductory part of the thesis, I use the term “dispositive” throughout for similar reasons as articulated by Bussolini (2010) and Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer, Thaning (2014) – namely that the term dispositive has a wider scope and refers to the logic of a network of relations, while “apparatus” is more closely related either to technology in the narrow sense or to “state apparatuses” in Althusser's (1971) sense. It is nevertheless useful to keep in mind that whenever one of “apparatus”, “deployment”, “dispositive”, or “*dispositif*” appears, it refers to the same concept.

Giorgio Agamben has summarized Foucault's lengthy explanation in a useful manner by emphasizing three points:

- a. It is a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and non-linguistic, under the same heading [...]. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements.
- b. The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation.
- c. As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge. (Agamben 2009: 2–3)

Thus, the dispositive is a network of heterogeneous elements. Highlighting its heterogeneous nature, Philippe Verhaegen (1999: 112) has called the dispositive a “techno-semiotic bricolage”. The notion of bricolage, borrowed from Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966[1962]) and signifying the creative – that is, not previously structured – use of objects in order to solve a problem, helps us to understand the dispositive first and foremost as both an ongoing practice of assembling and as the outcome of this practice – it is thus not a pre-given or ready-made structure, but a constant (re)productive practice requiring the active participation of subjects. Consequently, the connection between power and knowledge becomes important – dispositive operates in the context of power/knowledge. We can say that within a dispositive, knowledge is put to work and we can no longer speak of the separate domains of discursive communication and governmental technologies. Knowledge is technical/instrumental and technologies are based on knowledge (see Peeters and Charlier 1999). It is in this sense that Foucault (2000c) speaks of “political rationality” or “reason”: an *instrumental* knowledge, knowledge put to work in the process of ordering social relations and in the construction and control of social subjects.

The construction of subjectivity is at the center of Foucault's understanding of the dispositive; it is through participation in the dispositive that an individual is rendered into a social subject. For example, the dispositive of sexuality constructs subjects that find the very truth of themselves in their sexuality (Foucault 1978) and the disciplinary dispositive called the Panopticon constructs docile subjects who practice self-discipline (Foucault 1977). First and foremost, then, the dispositive is an arrangement of elements that influences the behavior of individuals and that structures the possible field of actions of individuals (see also Raffnsøe 2008). André Berten (1999: 42) has even proposed that the dispositive could be conceptualized as an “environment”: “Dispositives are a way of understanding human being's natural or constructed environment not as a space of knowledge acquisition and transmission, but as a network that mediates knowledge [...]” We should examine this statement more closely since it will help us to conceptualize the semiotic nature of the dispositive.

Berten suggests that we understand by dispositive an environment within which it becomes possible to experience the social world. Within a dispositive,

individuals become subjects of knowledge, but simultaneously they are transformed into objects of (governmental and instrumental) knowledge.

Berten's suggestion to view dispositive as an environment mediating knowledge opens up the possibility to understand it in terms of a social *umwelt*²⁷ in Jakob von Uexküll's sense as a subjectively meaningful universe (Uexküll 1957[1934]; 1982[1940]), an environment that is delimited by the network of subjective semiotic relations. The concept of *umwelt* is essentially Uexküll's modification of the notion of milieu, which was "imported from mechanics into biology during the second half of the eighteenth century" and which the "French mechanists of the eighteenth century called [...] what Newton had referred to as "fluid" (Canguilhem 2008: 99). With the concept of milieu, "the problem mechanics had to solve was that of the action of distinct physical bodies at a distance" (ibid.). In his early writing, Uexküll himself used milieu as meaning "the part of the external world that affects animals" (cited in Brentari 2015: 63). Milieu is thus a mediated and mediating part of the surrounding world. In his attempt to think of how living beings construct their own world according to their physiological constitution, Uexküll replaced the milieu with *umwelt* – the environment that has the subject at its center. In the words of Georges Canguilhem, "the Umwelt of the animal is nothing other than a milieu centered in relation to that subject of vital values in which the living essentially consists" (2008: 112). We could say that biopolitical normalization manipulates those values based on which the human as a living being constructs its *umwelt*.

Now, Foucault himself, in conceptualizing biopolitics, uses the term milieu, and thus we are faced with the problem of why should we relate *umwelt* with the dispositive rather than with the milieu. In an attempt to provide an answer to this problem, let us take a look at what the milieu signifies for Foucault. For him, it is, first and foremost, "that in which circulation is carried out," and further:

The milieu is a set of natural givens – rivers, marshes, hills – and a set of artificial givens – an agglomeration of individuals, of houses, etcetera. The milieu is a certain number of combined, overall effects bearing on all who live in it. It is an element in which a circular link is produced between effects and causes, since an effect from one point of view will be a cause from another. [...] Finally, the milieu appears as a field of intervention in which, instead of affecting individuals as a set of legal subjects capable of voluntary actions – which would be the case of sovereignty – and instead of affecting them as a

²⁷ The concept of *umwelt* is not at all absent from social theory, being used, for example, by Alfred Schutz (1967[1932]) in his social phenomenology to designate the directly experienced social reality. Schutz defines it as distinct from *Mitwelt* (the world of contemporaries), *Vorwelt* (of predecessors), and *Folgewelt* (of successors). Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991), who are greatly influenced by Schutz, do not use the term *umwelt*, but on a couple of occasions employ the term milieu in a rather non-technical sense. Instead of *umwelt*, they speak of "reality". The term "milieu", which has a larger scope – that is, is not delimited by subjectivity, but designates the external conditions of human existence in general – was already prominently present in Auguste Comte's social theory (see Canguilhem 2008).

multiplicity of organisms, of bodies capable of performances, and of required performances – as in discipline – one tries to affect, precisely, a population. (2009: 21).

Population – defined as “a multiplicity of individuals who are and fundamentally and essentially only exist biologically bound to the materiality within which they live” (ibid.) – being, for Foucault, the fundamental subject of biopolitics, the notion of milieu appears as that through which the population can be accessed and its vital processes can be made governable. The milieu is a medium through which the population can be affected, intervened in not directly, but “at a distance”. As we recall, this aspect of the milieu is directly connected with Foucault’s understanding of government in general – government as the structuration of the possible field of actions of others.

The notion of milieu, however, does not entail the aspect of subjectivity. And furthermore, in its focus on circulation and causality, can be too readily interpreted in mechanistic terms, a risk identified also by Canguilhem who writes that the milieu, in its neo-Lamarckian guise, for example, “becomes a universal instrument for the dissolution of individualized organic syntheses into the anonymity of universal elements and movements” (2008: 103). The living being is reduced to the determination of external conditioning. Thus it seems necessary to speak, in the context of biopolitics, of the connection of dispositive and *umwelt*, since both concepts deal specifically with the structuration of subjectivity and subjective world(s). Interpreted along the lines of *umwelt*, dispositive emerges as a properly semiotic concept, enabling us to analyze the (simultaneous) semiotic construction of subjectivity and its context.

When *umwelt* is viewed from the Foucauldian perspective through the lens of the dispositive, we will begin to understand that any type of subjective social environment potentially transforms individuals into objects of knowledge, captures them within governmental relations, and in this sense, conducts their conduct so that it would conform to the norms set by this structured environment. In sum, becoming a knowing subject through the delimitation of a subjective universe is always accompanied by the normative aspects of the dispositives of power that influence and affect individuals’ behaviors. The interpretation of the dispositive as a concept close to *umwelt* is justified by Foucault’s (1986; 1988; 1990) conceptualization of the technologies of the self. Technologies of the self, or of life (*bios*) emphasize the active participation of individuals in their self-construction; in other words, they stress individuals’ freedom in the context of power relations. This does not mean that freedom would be a property of an individual liberated from sociopolitical relations. Quite the contrary, freedom signifies for Foucault a political praxis made possible by the contingent nature of dispositives. There is no subject outside dispositives; however, subjectivation is a process that always has the potentiality to disrupt the normative workings of dispositives. Johanna Oksala sums this point up nicely:

For Foucault, freedom refers to the indeterminateness of the constitutive matrix and to the contingency of all structures. It is the virtual fractures that appear in the invisible walls of our world, the opening up of possibilities for seeing how that which is might no longer be what it is. Freedom does not mean that everything is possible, but neither is the present a necessity. (2005: 208)

The Uexküllian *umwelt* emphasizes the role of the subject in the construction and constitution of its very own specific universe; life assumes the form of subjectivation, thus enabling us to cast aside the vague notion of “life itself” which is too readily reducible to “bare life” (as will be seen shortly in section 2.5). The Foucauldian dispositive stresses that the constitution of a subjective universe is always a political activity interwoven with power relations and objectifications of subjectivity. Whenever the social *umwelt* is analyzed, it is not enough to stress the subjective construction of meanings. Complementing *umwelt*-theory with the concept of dispositive allows us to consider that the elements and relations that become meaningful for the subject are not neutral, but embedded in power relations. Reverting the perspective and conceptualizing the dispositive in terms of the *umwelt*, allows us to notice the active participation of individuals when analyzing social mechanisms of subjectification.

2.3. Dispositive and normalization

When Foucault speaks of biopolitics he does this most often through the notion of normalization, even speaking of a “normalizing society” (1978: 144).²⁸ The focus on normalization when analyzing power relations is a strategy to move beyond the framework of sovereignty and law. One of Foucault’s aims was exactly to “cut off the king’s head” (2003c: 59) in political theory, and through this, to understand sovereignty as only one element of the dispositives of power. The specific practices and technologies of normalization and the relations of power inherent in society gain a more prominent position than the commands of the king. In *Security, Territory, Population* where Foucault distinguishes between three general dispositives of power – the juridico-legal, disciplinary, and security –, he writes:

This word “*disposer*” is important because, what enabled sovereignty to achieve its aim of obedience to the laws, was the law itself; law and sovereignty were absolutely united. Here, on the contrary, it is not a matter of imposing a law on men, but of the disposition of things, that is to say, of employing tactics rather than laws, or, of as far as possible employing laws as tactics; arranging things so that this or that end may be achieved through a certain number of means. (Foucault 2009: 99).

²⁸ In the 1974–1975 lecture course entitled *Abnormal* (Foucault 2003b), before he began using the terms biopower and biopolitics, Foucault speaks of the “power of normalization” as that power through which the figures of abnormality are constituted and politicized.

This aspect of the “disposition of things” is absolutely fundamental to Foucault in order to analyze the government of human beings on the basis of normalization. The emergence of biopolitics, according to Foucault, can be analyzed on the basis of a new political subject – the population – constructed as an object of knowledge and subject of action within the dispositive of security. Biopolitics is a specific form of government which understand human beings and their relations with and within their environment as natural phenomena (Foucault 2009: 70–75). Biopolitics is a form of conducting the conduct of individuals, and through this government, of constructing normalizable socio-political subjectivity – of subjectification.

We should not, however, understand Foucault’s insistence on an analysis of power beyond the juridico-legal dispositive as a statement that law or sovereignty have been historically overcome and a new era of normalization has arrived: “There is not the legal age, the disciplinary age, and then the age of security. [...] In reality you have a series of complex edifices [...] in which what above all changes is the dominant characteristic, [...] the system of correlation between juridico-legal mechanisms, disciplinary mechanisms, and mechanisms of security” (Foucault 2009: 8). Consequently, sovereignty does not disappear, but when the dispositive of security becomes dominant, it begins to function in a new way, becomes dependent on different aspects of power and knowledge. Above all, sovereignty becomes dependent on new types of normalization operative in the disciplinary and security dispositives.

The publications included in this thesis have touched upon the types of normalization in different dispositives, thus here I will provide only a short summary. The juridico-legal dispositive separates the legal and the illegal and defines the negative, what should not be done, and in this sense, it is normative only in the sense that it defines what is prohibited. Disciplinary normalization posits a model to which individuals must conform, norm is primary. The dispositive of security, however, searches for norms in the activity and behavior of human beings, attempts to “discover” the “natural” norms of populations: “The normal comes first and the norm is deduced from it [...]” (Foucault 2009: 63). “Natural” does not, however, mean intrinsic to living beings themselves. Instead, a norm is something that is constituted on the basis of “an average considered as optimal on the one hand, and, on the other, a bandwidth of the acceptable that must not be exceeded” (ibid., 6). The naturalness of a population and its norms become constituted, for example, by the governmental technology called statistics (see Hacking 1990). What is the “normal” crime rate of a society? The “normal” amount of people suffering from small pox? What should the “optimal” number of children per family be in order for the population to increase? What is the actual rate of mortality of infants and what is the optimal? When is the number low enough so that we can speak of a “normal” situation? And subjectivation has to occur within an environment structured according to these “optimizations” or “normalizations” – the number of children can become a signifier of normality and thus of one’s proper place in a society.

The term “security” in the context of the dispositive of security does not, firstly, refer to insurance against injury from an external force (be it another person or another state). Secondly, “security” does not refer either to the well-being and safety of the “sovereign and his territory” (Foucault 2009: 65). It refers instead to making sure that the vital process of (re)production, circulation of goods and movements of individuals function without major obstacles. In other words, security here refers to the insurance of a smooth process of life. Vital processes cannot be viewed apart from the milieu of humans as living beings, which is why it has also been argued that biopolitics does not, in the first place, intervene directly on life, but instead structures its surroundings in order to secure living processes (see Hull 2013).

Government according to the dispositive of security consists in “natural” government that attempts to conduct the behavior of individuals so that society would attain its optimal state. And the process of subjectivation – how individuals turn themselves into subjects – is conditioned by and occurs within the context of a “normalized” society, a society structured according to processes and norms seen as intrinsic or natural to it. And any sovereign decision has to take this highly structured – and knowable – field into account; the sovereign’s decisions are conditioned by this normalized, “natural” social space.

The conjunction of population–milieu–normalization is what makes the dispositive of security paradigmatic for biopolitics. The population is a subject-object that enables power to take hold of these processes of life and to render them governable. Structuring the milieu understood as the material (both artificial and natural) environment of the population enables government to conduct the conduct of humans as living beings. Knowledge of the behavior of individuals as collective populations within their material milieu enables them to be captured in the complex of power/knowledge.

When Foucault speaks of the inclusion of life into politics, he does not have in mind that humans as political beings are reduced to mere biological life. Instead he analyzes how a new kind of political subject-object emerges in the figure of the population, a figure that enables power to capture biological processes of life *as political*. Foucault’s analysis focuses on the specific technologies and rationalities of power and government as social practices of structuring human environment. This does not mean, however, that normalization does not occur at the individual level. As noted above, we should be wary of the simple distinction between individuals and populations – we can even say that in the context of biopolitical normalization individualization always occurs with reference to populational norms. This is also to say that the individual is always already a trans-individual.²⁹ And vice versa, populational norms can be embodied in concrete individuals.

²⁹ On the concept of trans-individuality, see Simondon (1989); Combes (2013).

2.4. Normativity and normalization: Canguilhem on biopolitics

Nevertheless, we should ask whether Foucault speaks of life from the biological perspective and, if so, from which specific perspective does he speak? What is the figure of life that is being normalized through dispositives of power? We have already answered that it is the ways of life according to which social subjectivation is simultaneously delimited, constrained and made possible. That is, the ways in which an individual is able to exist in a social environment, or, in a dispositive. It is now necessary to elaborate on these remarks according to Georges Canguilhem's approach to normalization and normativity – and it is through this that we can further conceptualize the positivity of biopolitics. Foucault's debt on the understanding of life in biopolitics to Canguilhem has already been noted by, for example, Maria Muhle (2014a; 2014b) and Catherine Mills (2013).

Both Muhle and Mills underscore the importance of the notion of “error” in Canguilhem's concept of life. In the words of Mills (2013: 75), “biopower is less a matter of controlling life that it is a matter of managing error – or rather, it is the former by virtue of the latter.” Error as a fundamental notion is highlighted by Foucault in the essay “Life: Experience and Science”, by saying that “life – and this is its radical feature – is that which is capable of error” (2000d: 476). Canguilhem himself explores the importance of error in the essays “Concept and Life” (1966) and “A New Concept in Pathology: Error”, appended to the 1966 edition of *The Normal and the Pathological* (1991), where he posits knowledge as immanent to the living process and connects the latter to information, being influenced by discoveries made in genetics. Error and the potentiality to go wrong, however, should not, in Canguilhem, be related solely to the – by now already rather outdated³⁰ – discovery of genetic code-as-language, but is present already in his understanding of normativity inherent in the living process.

The presence of the possibility of error derives from Canguilhem's understanding of life's inherent “normativity”,³¹ a concept that is juxtaposed to “normal” and “normalization”. ““Normal” is the term used by the nineteenth century to designate the scholastic prototype and the state of organic health” (Canguilhem 1991[1966]: 237); it thus indicates a normal state according to

³⁰ On language and information as metaphors for the description of the genetic code, see Kay (2000).

³¹ We should keep in mind that when Canguilhem speaks of the normativity of life, he almost always speaks of the living process of the individual living being. It is not, however, unproblematic to ascribe the individual organism a central and originary role in the construction of its milieu (Lecourt 1998), and furthermore, it is not at all clear what Canguilhem means when he speaks of individuality: can both the cell as well as the organisms be considered individuals, and is the society an individual capable of intentional action (Gayon 1998)? Individuality, in Canguilhem, is a relational concept that defies any substantial definition, and thus it is, again, conceptually close to the notion of the semiotic subject.

which the subject's health is evaluated. Presupposing a normal state presumes that health and disease can be discovered as if they were positive, objective facts, independent of the subject. Furthermore, positing the pathological as simply a deviation from the normal state, presupposes that the pathological is describable on the basis of normality, the latter being conceptualized then as "abnormal". Canguilhem, for his part, strives to conceptualize the pathological as ontologically different from the normal, and to this end he does not connect it with the normal, but with normativity.

Normativity is defined by Canguilhem as "the biological capacity to challenge the usual norms in case of critical situations" (1991: 284). Or again: "Normative, in the fullest sense of the word, is that which establishes norms" (1991: 126–127). The normative capacity of organisms thus consists in establishing new norms in critical situations, or in other words, when being sick, not to restore some kind of ideal normal state, but to recover to normal functioning by instituting new norms (see also Margree 2002). Health, for Canguilhem, means first and foremost the capacity of normativity, or, the capacity to adapt to conditions posed by pathologies and the environment. Normativity, thus, means to break (old) norms rather than follow them.

Underlying this conceptualization of normativity is Canguilhem's understanding of life as polarity (1991: 128). And it is in the context of polarity that the living process emerges as a constant activity of valorization: "The value of life, that is, life as value, life in its inner normativity, is thus founded on its own uncertainty or precariousness (*précarité*). The normative dynamics of life unfold between the two poles: the preservation of the internal organic equilibrium [...], and the permanent challenge to this very equilibrium" (Muhle 2014a: 85). When Canguilhem writes that there "is no biological indifference" (1991: 129), and that this is the basis on which we can speak of normativity in the first place, this means that everything that the living being is related to acquires either a positive or a negative value. Canguilhem is very close to Uexküll here – for the latter the living being can only be indifferent to that with which it has no relation at all: there can be no neutral objects in *umwelt*, everything acquires a significance, a meaning (Uexküll 1982). To have meaning is to have value for the subject (see also Kull 2011).

In order to inquire into what Canguilhem could have to say about biopolitics, let us briefly take a look at the interpretation provided by Catherine Mills. For Mills, biopolitics is necessarily "reactive in relation to life" (2013: 75). Why? She explains that the "errancy internal to life constantly provokes the biopolitical state, forcing it to respond to the contingencies of the living and the phenomena of life" (Mills 2013: 89). For her, the biopolitical dispositive of security can only respond and react to the processes of life. Reactivity does not, however, signify negativity that is characteristic of sovereign power that operates through privation and death. Neither does it signify negativity in the sense of oppression. The capturing of life into normalizing dispositives can simultaneously be a reactive and productive process. And indeed, it is in biopolitics' reactivity that we can find the formulation of the positivity of biopolitics.

In order to explain this, we need to turn back to the distinction between normalization and normativity. To normalize means to define a way of life according to a normal state, which means also that a living being is captured within relations in a social artificial-natural *umwelt* through which s/he comes to be defined. To normalize means thus to define a way of life as a positive fact, one that is delimitable as an object of knowledge. Normalization does not, then, have as its object the body of an organism itself, but its relations within an *umwelt*. This, in turn, means that the inherent normativity of a living being is captured within normalized relations that are posited as definitive of a “proper” way of life. Normativity – defined by the polarity of positive and negative – is captured within a set of positively knowable relations. Positivity here signifies, then, a lack of polarity.

Now, this capture of the polarity of life into positivity does not, of course, mean that we could conceptualize a division between, on the one hand, the dynamism of life, and on the other, the static nature of biopolitical normalization. The relation between life and power is not that of process and structure. We need to understand the normalization of biopolitical dispositives itself as contingent and inherently changeable – as dynamic. As Canguilhem himself has noted, social norms are never “those of the whole society” (1991: 156). And indeed, we should be careful in speaking of *a* biopolitical dispositive or *a* society in the singular; rather, biopolitical normalization always occurs within the context of agonistic relations in which norms are constantly contested and inherently contestable.³² That is, we cannot speak of *a* society as a whole because it is constantly being constructed through different and differing sites of normalization, that is, dispositives that are themselves in agonistic relations of constant (re)construction. In short, since a society is an ongoing process of association (see Latour 2005), there can be no single and totalized social *umwelt* or dispositive. There is always a multiplicity of (competing) normalizing dispositives in the ongoing construction of society – social norms need to be “invented”, as Canguilhem puts it (1991: 259), which results in the multiplicity of norms (see Mol 1998) and in the precarity of “human institutions” (Canguilhem 1991: 197).

Canguilhem’s notion of life as the ongoing process of normativity – of creating norms – is inherently open to biopolitical conceptualization as it is based on the very same concept of norm that is at the center of Foucauldian biopolitics. It is not only politics that prescribes norms to life, but it is also life that constructs norms in a socio-political context. This fact makes thinkable both the possibility of resistance in the context of biopolitics and the possibility that life can be normalized politically – through institutional practices, discourses, power relations, etc. – in the first place. Life, insofar as it is normative, can also be normalized and managed, captured into the positivity of dispositives.

³² See, for example, Foucault’s understanding of government in “The Subject and Power” (1982), or how Chantal Mouffe (2000) understands the social as a field traversed by agonistic relations.

2.5. The Agambenian dispositive: bare life in the biopolitical machine

Giorgio Agamben reinterprets Foucault's notion of the dispositive and in the process provides a different perspective on the figure of life in biopolitics. In contrast to Foucault, who analyzes the production of subjects, Agamben's focus lies on the production of bare life, or in other words, on desubjectification. His perspective is important to take into account since it reveals an important aspect of biopolitical dispositives: accompanying every process of subjectivation is a potential for desubjectification. Agamben's interpretation of the dispositive will, however, be approached critically because of the way it highlights the primary role of objects and technology in the narrow sense.

Before moving on to the dispositive, a few introductory words on Agamben's development of the concept of biopolitics. Agamben understands Foucault's attempt to "cut off the king's head" and his focus on the specific techniques of normalization as inhibiting a full understanding of biopolitics. He seeks to reintroduce sovereignty as the fundamental concept according to which biopolitics can be analyzed. According to this shift in focus, he analyzes biopolitics as producing bare life that is exposed to sovereign violence. Agamben conceptualizes bare life as that which is a necessary precondition for any politics, but which must be excluded in order that the constitution of a political way of life be made possible. The result of this inclusive exclusion is a life that can be killed with impunity, that is, a life abandoned by the juridical order and exposed to the sovereign decision that performs via the force of law, while the normalizing and structuring aspects of law are suspended. Biopolitics, for Agamben, is thus describable as a state of exception in which the law is embodied in the sovereign who has the prerogative of deciding over the value of life. (Agamben 1998; 2005; 2016) Presupposing the primacy of sovereignty, Agamben can extend the concept of biopolitics to the whole of Western politics and state that, "in its origin Western politics is also biopolitics" (2004: 80). The notion of biopolitics thus loses its specificity and begins to signify any type of politics.

In the essay "What Is an Apparatus?", Agamben generalizes Foucault's concept of the dispositive and understands it as anything that produces subjects out of living beings. He states that we have "two great classes: living beings (or substances) and apparatuses. And, between these two, as a third class, subjects. I call a subject that which results from the relation and, so to speak, from the relentless fight between living beings and apparatuses" (Agamben 2009: 14). This is a generalization in the opposite direction to what I proposed earlier. While I suggested that the dispositive could be understood in terms of *umwelt* which can only be provisionally delineated in its heterogeneity, Agamben's proposal leads him to consider even singular objects as dispositives:

[...] I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons,

madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth [...], but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and – why not – language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses [...]. (2009: 14)

A dispositive can simultaneously be something very general and something extremely specific. Let us consider the example of the cigarette – on what grounds could we call it a dispositive? It is true that the cigarette shapes behavior: guides the hand to the mouth, forces one to go outside if smoking is not allowed inside, structures one’s behavior to have a cigarette at regular intervals, etc. But is the cigarette, in this sense – in itself – a dispositive? Following Foucault, we could give the name “dispositive of the cigarette” to a network of relations established between knowledges (medical, psychological, economic, artistic), institutions (production industries, marketing teams, hospitals, etc.), laws, norms, etc. In other words, the “dispositive of the cigarette” would signify a network of semiotic relations within which a living being behaves and acts – and not a specific object. Now, if we include under the notion of dispositive common objects in their own right, this would enable us to focus primarily on desubjectification – that is, objectification – and fragmentation. The cigarette, to continue with this example, only regulates certain compulsive and repetitive behaviors while indeed it does not construct a new subjectivity. Faced with objects, an individual’s behavior can be affected, but s/he is not for that reason subjectivized. Agamben generalizes this partiality and fragmented nature of dispositives to our contemporary societies: “What defines the apparatuses that we have to deal with in the current phase of capitalism is that they no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the processes of what can be called desubjectification” (2009: 20).

Another example Agamben uses is the cellular telephone of which he writes: “He who lets himself be captured by the “cellular telephone” apparatus [...] cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled” (2009: 21).³³ In other words, the individual is reduced to a number through which s/he can be monitored and put under surveillance – s/he is made knowable *as* that number. It is no longer the living being we are talking about, but its “data double”, to use Haggerty and Ericson’s (2000) formulation. The individual living being is separated from its actual behavior by the process of objectification as a data unit. This line of reasoning helps us understand why Agamben calls the relations between living beings and dispositives a “relentless fight”: entering a dispositive, something of a living being is extracted and what is extracted is put in his or her place – a telephone number

³³ In an essay entitled “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, Gilles Deleuze follows a similar line of thought by conceptualizing individuals as deconstructible into *dividuals* in the context of modern digital technologies of surveillance and control: “The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “*dividuals*”, and masses, samples, data, markets, or “*banks*”” (1992: 5, original italics).

and the behaviors (calls, text messages, purchases, movements tracked through GPS, etc.) associated with it now represent the individual living being. A double movement, then: on the one hand, the living human being uses objects that do not provide anything but “spectral forms” (Agamben 2009: 21) of subjectivity, and on the other, s/he is objectified by what is extracted from him or her and captured in a dispositive.

That is, what is known and what is said of the living being have, in actuality, very little to do with the living being itself. Agamben articulates this separation of living beings and languages in *The Sacrament of Language*:

On the one hand, there is the living being, more and more reduced to a purely biological reality and to bare life. On the other hand, there is the speaking being, artificially divided from the former, through a multiplicity of technico-mediatic apparatuses, in an experience of the word that grows ever more vain, for which it is impossible to be responsible and in which anything like a political experience becomes more and more precarious. When the ethical – and not simply cognitive – connection that unites words, things, and human actions is broken, this in fact promotes a spectacular and unprecedented proliferation of vain words on the one hand and, on the other, of legislative apparatuses that seek obstinately to legislate on every aspect of that life on which they seem no longer to have any hold. (Agamben 2011: 70–71)

Here “apparatuses” function as sites of separation, of reduction of living beings to bare life. It seems to me that here we can unproblematically use the term “apparatus”, since Agamben explicitly references their “technico-mediatic” aspects.³⁴ We are not dealing so much with material-semiotic networks, but, we could say, with technology in the narrow sense that has as its main function the separation of living beings from linguistic semiosis – the type of semiosis that makes a human out of a living being. Agamben’s treatment of the dispositive thus echoes Heidegger’s conceptualization of technology as that which orders human beings into a “standing-reserve” (Heidegger 1977; see also Campbell 2011: ch. 2). Human beings’ ethical relation with language is cut, and this separation results in putting humans in the service of technology – ready for disposing as necessary. When apparatuses speak *for* the living beings, the latter end up being nothing other than cogs in the machine, or in other words, living beings lose the ability to live in a meaningful manner, they lose the capacity for semiosis.

This explicitly technological and alienating aspect of contemporary dispositives is, of course, not an insignificant aspect of their functioning and should not be dismissed. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to ground the notion of the dispositive onto a technological base – this would too easily lead us to thinking along the lines of technological determinism according to which each new popular device alienates the human being further from him or herself. More-

³⁴ Although originally, Agamben (2006) uses the Italian word “*dispositivo*”. It is in the English translation that it is transformed into “apparatus”.

over, we could run into the danger of conceptualizing the broader, non-material, dispositives – such as language, literature – on the basis of technology in the narrow, material sense.

Foucault and Agamben provide us with two distinct routes for conceptualizing the connections between semiotics and biopolitics. For Foucault, the emphasis is on the construction and production of subjectivity through normalization and government. Agamben puts the emphasis on the production of bare life abandoned by the juridical order and exposed to the sovereign decision. These distinct perspectives result in a differing use of a central analytic concept – the dispositive. Foucault understands the dispositive to be a network of heterogeneous elements within which subjectivity is articulated – in this sense, he even speaks of a “dispositive of subjectivity” (Foucault 2005: 319). I have proposed that we understand the Foucauldian dispositive as closely tied to Uexküll’s notion of the *umwelt* – the dispositive as a normative and normalizing social environment rendering subjectivation possible. The primary analytic focus would here be on the subjective semiotic relations through which technologies of the self are joined together with technologies of power and government.

In reintroducing sovereignty into biopolitical theory, Agamben understands biopolitics not as the formation of social relations through production of subjectivity, but as the reduction of ways of life to bare life exposed to sovereign violence. The Agambenian view on the concept of dispositive reflects this. The dispositive functions for him more in the manner of a technological apparatus, a machine for capturing the lives of human beings that become objectified and separated from their lives. Living beings captured in the apparatuses are separated from their semiotic capacities – human beings from language – and thus they are reduced to merely living beings without agency. We could thus say that Agamben’s perspective on biopolitics stresses semiotic destruction, not production, or more precisely, the incapacitation of living beings’ semiosis – the relation of human beings and language is cut.

The argument of the thesis is that biopolitics operates primarily through subjectification – the production of subjectivity, but it is important to keep in mind also the potential desubjectifications and objectifications that Agamben speaks about. However, his interpretation of the dispositive veers too far into the territory of technological determinism which is generalized to all dispositives. In what follows, we will operate with the Foucauldian dispositive coupled with the notion of *umwelt* in which the potentiality of Agambenian desubjectification always lurks. We should thus keep in mind Foucault’s statement that it is not the case “that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous” (1984b: 343).

3. FREEDOM AND SUBJECTIVITY IN THE CONTEXT OF BIOPOLITICS

So far we have treated the question of the subject in biopolitics along the lines of Foucault's general understanding of power and government in which the subject is conceived as not merely an object of power, but as capable of acting on account of him or herself, and consequently, of constructing oneself *with freedom, albeit in the context of power relations*.³⁵ When writing about biopolitics, we have to consider, at least briefly, another approach to the relation between power and subjectivity that has been largely influential in biopolitical theorizations. This approach underlines the process of desubjectification, objectification, and dehumanization in the context of biopolitics. Here, the subject is understood to be reduced to "sheer life" or "bare life" and, consequently, stripped of the potentiality of meaningful political action. Biopolitics, in this sense, reduces human beings to the state of mere survival. The previous chapter dealt briefly with desubjectification when outlining Giorgio Agamben's reinterpretation of Foucault's concept of the dispositive. The aim of this chapter is to examine in more general terms the way in which theorists like Hannah Arendt and Agamben understand biopolitics as the emergence of an object of politics – "life itself" – separate from the subject and, consequently, conceptualize biopolitics as a quasi-politics or a politics that precludes the potentiality of freedom. This approach is then countered by Foucault's conceptualization of biopolitics as not the reduction of politics, but as the expansion and multiplication of the potential for political action.

3.1. Biopolitics vs. politics

The model of politics according to which freedom of the subject is commonly thought, is deliberative politics with reference to the Ancient Greek *polis* as a site within which politics is made possible. This is the ideal model of politics for Hannah Arendt who attempted to understand the new post-World War II context within which Western human beings found themselves. In *The Human Condition* (1998[1958]) she argues that, in modern society, political action in the Greek (Athenian) sense is no longer possible since life has been made the highest good of society. "Sheer life" (*zoē*), as opposed to the "good life" (*bios*), has entered the public realm and thus politics has been transformed into the management of survival of human beings. Although Arendt never uses the terms biopolitics or biopower, her analysis of the entrance of sheer life into modern politics is the reason why she is considered to be a "theorist of biopolitics *avant la lettre*" (Braun 2007: 7).

³⁵ I have dealt with the question of simultaneous subjectification and subjectivation processes in my bachelor's thesis; and the article "Self-construction of the subject in the context of power relations" was published (Puumeister 2012a).

Arendt's analysis of modern politics is informed by Aristotle's (2002) distinction between sheer life and good life that is symmetrical with the division between *oikos* and *polis*, the private household and the public affairs of the city. Conceptualizing sheer life as belonging to the private household, she relates them to the realm of necessity, the satisfaction of everyday biological needs of human beings. Freedom becomes possible only in the public realm, in the *polis*. Furthermore, freedom of action becomes possible when one is free *from* concerns over biological needs.³⁶ Politics, for Arendt, thus cannot involve concerns for biological aspects of life. The "good life" does not refer in any way to biological life; it is "'good" to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process" (Arendt 1998: 37).

Arendt's understanding of modern society as an enlarged household in which sheer life becomes a predominant concern transforms politics into management and administration of (biological) necessities. The modern society is, consequently, a phenomenon in which creative political action becomes impossible. Instead, human beings are relegated to normalized behavior.³⁷ In the summarizing words of Hanna Pitkin (2000: 181), behavior and action are distinguished in the following manner: "Behavior is rule-governed, obedient, conventional, uniform, and status-oriented; action, by contrast, is spontaneous and creative; it involves judging and possibly revising goals, norms, and standards rather than accepting them as given. Behavior is routine, action unpredictable, even heroic." By foregrounding behavior, human beings are transformed into laboring animals³⁸ whose sole function is to reproduce sheer life. Arendtian biopolitics understands subjects to be, then, wholly subjected to the normalizing power of society, with the only potentiality for freedom of action understood to stem from mastering the necessities of life and relegating them from politics altogether. Freedom and biopolitics cannot be, for Arendt, thought together.

Agamben's line of argument is strikingly similar to Arendt's. According to Claire Blencowe, for example, Agamben shares much more with Arendt than with Foucault, whose understanding of biopolitics he is allegedly attempting to

³⁶ "Natural community in the household [...] was born of necessity, and necessity ruled over all activities performed in it. The realm of the *polis*, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the *polis*." (Arendt 1998: 30–31)

³⁷ "It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement." (Arendt 1998: 40)

³⁸ "Labor" is distinguished from "work": the latter signifies the act and process of making, fabricating some object; the former signifies the simple reproduction of life.

complete or correct (see Blencowe 2010). Indeed, Agamben, too, begins his *Homo Sacer: Bare Life and Sovereignty* (1998) with the Aristotelian distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, life common to all living beings and a politically qualified way of life of a certain group of living (human) beings. In addition, his argument also involves the observation that biopolitics, first and foremost, separates something like a bare life from political life; it produces *zoē* – life that is excluded from politics, but nevertheless included in it as a presupposition of *bios*. This inclusive exclusion of *zoē* marks, for Agamben, a structure of biopolitics which makes it possible to reduce human beings to simple living objects, that is, to life that is stripped of all rights and exposed to sovereign violence. Just like Arendt, Agamben’s main concern is to show how the inclusion of bare life into politics reduces human beings to a non-human state of life, a state that no longer allows any political freedom.

In contrast to Arendt, however, Agamben searches for an ahistorical or transhistorical structure of biopolitics. Although he does acknowledge that “modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoē*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zoē*” (Agamben 1998: 13), he nevertheless finds already the Greek division to be biopolitical, allowing for the capture of bare life into politics. For Agamben, biopolitics is not so much a modern invention, but an ahistorical structure of Western politics as a whole: “*It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*” (Agamben 1998: 11, original italics). This “biopolitical body” is analyzed through the figure of *homo sacer* – originally a concept in Roman Law³⁹ –, someone who is abandoned by the protection of law and who can be killed with impunity. With respect to the *homo sacer*, “all men act as sovereigns” (Agamben 1998: 53). The biopolitical body is a body that is reduced to bare life and rendered killable. Understanding the whole of Western politics as based on the structure of inclusive exclusion, Agamben can conclude that its fundamental and originary function is desubjectification and objectification of human beings through the separation of bare life from political life. There are, of course, significant problems with this kind of formal and structural conceptualization of politics. In the words of Thomas Lemke (2005), it is, for example, simultaneously too general and too narrow in the sense that it effaces significant insights into technologies of power and, at the same time, reduces politics to one specific structure (see also Coleman and Grove 2008). Katia Genel (2006) provides a similar critique, stating that Agamben’s view reduces all of politics to the decision over the value of life.

Both Arendt and Agamben underscore the dehumanizing and desubjectifying aspects of biopolitics, stressing that the politicization of life, in fact, makes political action – and, consequently, freedom – impossible. For Arendt, human beings are normalized and condemned to mere reproductive behavior; for Agamben, they are objectified and rendered killable. Both are prone to

³⁹ See on the meaning of *homo sacer* also Fowler (1911).

totalizing visions of power: Arendt “writes about the social as if an evil monster from outer space, entirely external to and separate from us, had fallen upon us intent on debilitating, absorbing, and ultimately destroying us, gobbling up our distinct individuality and turning us into robots that mechanically serve its purposes” (Pitkin 2000: 4); Agamben (2016: Part III) tells us that the only way to escape the hold of biopolitics is to rethink the concepts of politics and life altogether.⁴⁰ Biopolitics is thus conceptualized by both along the lines of total subjection, stripping human beings of the capacity for (self-)construction. Once the biological body enters politics, the latter can no longer be conceptualized as politics. In this way, both Arendt and Agamben seem to perpetuate the idea that “true” politics can only be practiced by and among “minds”, that is, politics has to be based on symbolic communication, otherwise it is already perverted into an inhuman quasi-politics.

Now, the understanding that political freedom of action cannot be thought alongside biopolitics, is not limited to Arendt and Agamben, but is present, too, in most theorists concerned with emancipatory politics. Alain Badiou, for example, in his book *Ethics* (2001), clearly opposes mere life-as-survival to subjectivation according to fidelity to an event (see also Puumeister 2018); Jacques Rancière (2010b),⁴¹ for his part, has opposed politics to biopolitics, the latter being a simple process of control over bodies. Biopolitics is seen as an activity of administration, classification, management, control, etc. that has nothing to do with freedom of action – biopolitics signifies, for these theorists, the “withdrawal” or “retreat” of the political, to use Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s (1997) phrase.

3.2. Biopolitics and freedom

If biopolitics is seen along the lines of total subjection, the only manner of thinking freedom remains that of escape from it altogether. Furthermore, the only way of (re)thinking politics appears to lie in the flight from biopolitics. For Agamben, who equates Western politics with biopolitics, this task is made all the more difficult since political freedom has to take the form of escaping the millennia-old tradition of politics as a whole. He does this by getting rid of the

⁴⁰ Moreover, it is necessary as well to rethink Western ontology, since it is based on the same structure of inclusive exclusion of Being as biopolitics is based on the inclusive exclusion of life (see especially Agamben 2004; 2016).

⁴¹ When we look at Rancière’s own treatment of politics, it is, however, not at all clear that biopolitics based on normalization should be excluded from the domain of politics, and consequently, of freedom. Rancière understands politics to be precisely that process through which the limits of the political community are delineated and, simultaneously, transgressed by introducing new political subjects who are recognized as capable of “speech” (see Rancière 1995; 2010a). Based on his theory of politics, thus, we have no basis to exclude the biological needs and concerns of human beings from politics. Instead, biological aspects of lives can always become political when they come to define communities and political subjects.

notion of subjectivity altogether and searching for an “Ungovernable” “form-of-life” – a life that cannot be separated from its form (Agamben 2016: 207). Inevitably this concept of the “form-of-life” remains obscure and indefinable, characterized by such notions as whatever singularity, contemplation, potentiality, inoperativity, destituent power, etc. (Agamben 2000; 2007; 2016). Inevitably, firstly because the “form-of-life” that Agamben wishes to define refers to a “coming politics”, to a politics that would enable us to render the Western biopolitical structure inoperative. And secondly, because it has to remain “ungovernable”, which also means indefinable, unclassifiable, and unidentifiable. Any capture into language would already mean capture into the mechanisms of power (see also Puumeister 2017).

While for Agamben, the totalizing and totalized structure of biopolitics needs to be countered with an indefinable ungovernable “form-of-life” in order to be resisted, Foucault understands resistance to be the primary element of any dispositive of power: “[...] resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with resistance. So I think that *resistance* is the main word, *the key word*, in this dynamic” (1997: 167, original italics). This also means that there is no underlying structure to biopolitics that would define it once and for all. Resistance is that through which transformation of dispositives takes place. We are dealing with complexes of power/knowledge that constantly need to react to the processes of life (see also Mills 2013). Indeed, Foucault himself stated that life, when “integrated into techniques that govern and administer it [...] constantly escapes them” (1978: 143).

We have to ask: how does life escape the capture into dispositives of bio-power? Agamben (2016: 108) criticizes Foucault for not getting rid of the concept of the subject when conceptualizing freedom – since, “if power relations necessarily refer to a subject,” the “ungovernable” cannot be thought based on this concept. However, it is the inherent ambiguity of subjectivity, the duality of subjectivation and subjectification, what enables Foucault to assert that resistance comes first. It is evident in Foucault’s approach, too, that the primary object of biopolitical government is not the individual subject, but instead the vital processes that lie beyond the individual – biopolitics targets, first and foremost, the population and its processes of life. In the words of Katharine Braun, biopolitics “does not really target individuals as living beings. It does not primarily operate through exercising direct control over the body or through intervening in individual lives. Instead, it targets collective phenomena such as the birth *rate*, or the *average* life expectancy” (2007: 11, original italics). The individual is rendered normalizable on the level of the population, since it is there that the “constancy of phenomena that one might expect to be variable” is revealed (Foucault 2009: 74). When Foucault speaks of biopolitical normalization, he does not speak of individual bodies, but of populations.

Thus it might appear as if we can, also in Foucault’s approach, discern a type of division between bare life and political life, between *zoē* and *bios*: the individual human being is constituted through his or her reduction to the

naturalness discovered on the level of the population. The individual is rendered governable on the level of the population. Ultimately, biopolitics targets “man-as-species” (Foucault 2003c: 242) within which “individual life is just a transitory moment” (Braun 2007: 11). For Foucault, however, biopolitics is not to be understood as the “withdrawal of politics” or as a quasi-politics hampering the creative action of individuals. Instead, he deals with biopolitics as a specific political rationality that is based on specific technologies of government. Doing this, he avoids the totalizing reasoning of both Arendt and Agamben. “[W]here Arendt sees the growth of an anonymous social pressure to conform for the sake of ‘life’, Foucault discerns the gradual consolidation of more or less explicit and patterned ‘technologies of power’ devoted to normalizing individuals” (Dolan 2005: 373). Where Agamben finds the transhistorical structure of subjection and exclusion of bare life, Foucault sees the historically contingent convergence of productive biopolitics with deadly sovereign power (Foucault 1978: 149; 2003: 239–264).

Contingency, furthermore, is inscribed into the very logic of biopolitical governmentality that Foucault elaborates according to the dispositive of security. Biopolitical normalization concerns processes that cannot be wholly fixed or permanently pinned down; instead, the phenomena captured within the dispositive are *processes*, that is, they are constantly in movement and thus power might always lose control over them: “The specific space of security refers [...] to a series of possible events; it refers to the temporal and the uncertain, which have to be inserted within a given space.” (Foucault 2009: 20). The space in which these uncertain events take place is called by Foucault the “milieu”, “a set of natural givens – rivers, marshes, hills – and a set of artificial givens – and agglomeration of individuals, houses, etcetera. The milieu is a certain number of combined, overall effects bearing on all who live in it” (2009: 21). Biopolitics, thus, concerns the processes of life of the population in a specific milieu – it concerns, in the end, the regulation of the behavior of the population and its *umwelt*. This enables Gordon Hull (2013) to state that biopolitics is not primarily about life, but about the “management of uncertainty”. Now, if the vital processes of the population are themselves “aleatory” and prone to error, then the individual lives and behaviors normalized according to these processes are nothing short of unpredictable. Foucault’s conception of biopolitics thus inevitably involves the freedom of individual subjects. And, according to Frederick Dolan, this also means that Foucault does not understand biopolitics as eliminating political action, but instead “the spread of this mode of ‘government’ tends to increase opportunities for political action that takes the form of questioning, contesting, and resisting the *status quo*” (Dolan 2005: 373). This is what Dolan means by the “paradoxical liberty of bio-power”: if the human individual is cut up, classified, captured into dispositives in new ways involving his or her biological processes and bodily characteristics, this is not necessarily a *reduction*, but simultaneously an opportunity to construct social relations along new trajectories. Paul Rabinow (1996), for example, has spoken of “biosociality” which accompanies the technologies of biopolitical govern-

ment and that signifies the ways in which human beings form communities and societies based on biological (and often pathological) characteristics (see also Gibbon and Novas 2008).

Normalization of a population in its milieu, thus, far from reducing human lives to bare life, tends to multiply – with each new categorization, with each new capture of a dispositive – trajectories along which political action is made possible. Although the individual living human being is not the primary object of biopolitics, s/he is that through which the processes of the population can be accessed – the individual living being is the empirically delimitable point of reference for the processes that transcend him or her.⁴² It is through individual(s) that population-level processes can be subjectified, given their “body”, so to speak. Conformation to norms of the population is, however, not something automatic and deterministic; thus, “The other side of normalization, in other words, is contestation [...]” (Dolan 2005: 375). This is the reason why, for Foucault, it is not necessary to get rid of the concept of the subject. Paradoxically, the multiplication and proliferation of dispositives that according to Agamben reduce subjects to mere “spectral forms” of subjectivity, multiplies, at the same time, the lines of resistance – makes it possible for new forms of subjectivity to appear. Furthermore, it is along the lines of resistance that politics is made possible, because according to Foucault, “nothing is political, everything can be politicized, everything may become political. Politics is no more or less than that which is born with resistance to governmentality, the first uprising, the first confrontation” (cited in Senellart 2009: 390; on this formulation, see also Deuber-Mankowsky 2008).

Power is not seen as a totalized machine of subjection, it is the process itself of constructing contingent dispositives that are themselves prone to error and transformation. The conditions of thinking freedom within the context of biopolitical dispositives lies not so much in the capacities of life (that is, that which is normalized) – because living beings are inherently capable of choice and invention through learning insofar as they are semiotic, or at least semiosic⁴³ and thus normative beings –, but in the inherent fragility and

⁴² In *Security, Territory, Population*, when Foucault conceptualizes population as the primary subject-object of biopolitics, he connects it briefly to his analysis, undertaken in *The Order of Things*, of the emergence of the modern human being – “Man” – in nineteenth century human sciences: “[...] the theme of man, and the “human sciences” that analyze him as a living being, working individual, and speaking subject, should be understood on the basis of the emergence of population as the correlate of power and the object of knowledge. After all, man, as he is thought and defined by the so-called human sciences of the nineteenth century, and as he is reflected in nineteenth century humanism, is nothing other than a figure of population” (Foucault 2009: 79). That is, the emergence of biopolitics is the background on which the figure of “Man” was sketched; it is thus not the reduction of man, but the definition of the human being in a new manner as an empirico-transcendental doublet.

⁴³ On the distinction of the “semiotic” and “semiosic”, see Deely (2005) and Rattasepp, Kull (2016): “semiosic” signifies capability for semiosis, while “semiotic” refers to the specifically human capability of adopting a meta-perspective on meaning-making – the capability of being aware of using signs.

precariousness of biopolitical dispositives themselves. Dispositives cannot be totalized – and, consequently, they cannot be reduced to a single underlying structure based on which “life itself” would be captured into the mechanisms of biopower.

This chapter juxtaposed two perspectives on biopolitics. The first was Agamben’s and Arendt’s view according to which human lives are reduced to a non-human state of being of mere survival. The second was the Foucauldian perspective according to which biopolitical government, by constructing new modes of existence according to which human beings can be made governable, simultaneously creates the possibilities to adopt those modes by those governed. Biopolitics thus always entails the possibility of resistance and freedom. And this is why biopolitics should be seen to operate through semiotic mediation – and not as directly intervening in life. Nevertheless, the aim here is not to completely disqualify Agamben’s analysis of the production of bare life in biopolitics – the point was simply to underline that it might not be fruitful to posit this process as the primary function of biopolitics from which all others (such as subjectification) derive. To see how Agamben’s approach could still prove useful, the next chapter will employ it to analyze the biosemiotic concepts of the semiotic threshold and *umwelt* from the biopolitical perspective.

4. BIOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF BIOSEMIOTICS

The aim of this chapter is to problematize a couple of biosemiotic concepts, namely those of the semiotic threshold and *umwelt*. Through this problematization, the chapter hopes to show the potential biopolitical distinctions and hierarchizations at work in biosemiotic theory. The most basic biopolitical distinction is, of course, between the human being and “other” forms of life. Most importantly to analyses of biopolitics, this distinction allows to form hierarchies within the bounds of the human species, marking some humans as improper humans.

The article “Biopolitics Meets Biosemiotics” (publication IV), co-written with Andreas Ventsel, attempted to employ biosemiotic concepts in analyses of biopolitics. At the center were the notion of the semiotic threshold and types of semiosis as corresponding to distinct levels of meaning-making activity (iconic semiosis corresponding to the vegetative level, indexical to the animal, and symbolic to the cultural). The article, however, did not consider the opposite perspective – what would the analyses of and theoretical approaches to biopolitics have to offer to how we understand biosemiotics. This chapter aims to rectify this omission.

Biopolitical analyses almost always involve a critical perspective in attempting to bring to light mechanisms and technologies of power in socio-cultural processes that are seemingly natural and already self-evident. Biosemiotics attempts nothing less than to construe a novel understanding of life – not to conceptualize life from the perspective of physico-chemical processes of organization, but from that of meaning-making and semiosis; life would thus be describable as interpretation and communication (see Emmeche and Kull 2011; Kull 2008). In Jesper Hoffmeyer’s and Claus Emmeche’s words, “the traditional paradigm of biology [should] be substituted by a *semiotic paradigm* the core of which is that *biological form is understood primarily as sign*” (1991: 138, original italics). To approach biosemiotics from the critical perspective of biopolitical analysis would mean to ask whether biosemiotics, in its attempt to (re)structure the knowledge of life, does not, in fact, participate in some way in biopolitical processes of capturing living beings into dispositives of power. This question will be explored, firstly, through the investigation of the same concepts that were at the center of the article “Biopolitics Meets Biosemiotics”, but inverting the direction of analysis and reconsidering the notion of the semiotic threshold from the perspective of biopolitics; and secondly, through the problematization of Uexküll’s theory of the *umwelt*.

4.1. The semiotic threshold revisited

For Giorgio Agamben (2004), one of the fundamental symbolic dispositives of biopolitics is the one he names “the anthropological machine” of modernity.⁴⁴ This machine operates through isolating, within the human being, the non-human aspects of life, thus making it possible to animalize⁴⁵ the human (Agamben 2004: 37; see also Rattasepp 2014). That is, it aims to separate that which is truly and properly human (e.g., rationality, language, thought) from that which is improper to the human (e.g., passion, desire, instinct, sexuality) and which the human shares with other living beings: “Anthropogenesis is what results from the caesura and articulation between human and animal. This caesura passes first of all within man” (Agamben 2004: 79). The anthropological machine defines the human being as the one who is capable of transcending the merely animal processes of life. It presupposes that humanity is the exception from animality. The anthropological machine does not *define* life, but articulates it into distinct potentialities, characteristics, etc., and in the process positing some as superior to others. Insofar as these “lower” processes can be found to work also in the human being, it is possible to understand some human beings to be not enough human (for example, those who do not govern their passions). To discover the properly human is to simultaneously identify those processes and characteristics that need to be excluded in order to become a “true” human being.

Agamben traces the foundations of the anthropological-biopolitical machine back to Aristotle whose *De anima* (2016) he identifies as proposing a first generic definition of life as “distinct from the life of the single individual, from a life” (Agamben 2016: 201). He calls Aristotle’s conceptualization of life “philosophico-political” (ibid., 195) rather than scientific since it does not, in fact, *define* life, but “limits himself to dividing it thanks to the isolation of the nutritive function, in order then to rearticulate it into a series of distinct and correlative potentials or faculties (nutrition, sensation, thought)” (ibid., 200). The result of this division is a “hierarchical articulation of a series of faculties

⁴⁴ We have up to now criticized the overly negative and even apocalyptic aspects of Agamben’s view, according to which human beings are, in the context of biopolitics, reduced to mere animality and seen as helpless to resist power in any other way than escaping power relations entirely. This does not mean that certain aspects of Agamben’s oeuvre are not useful and on point. The notion of the anthropological machine according to which characteristics of life are hierarchized from an anthropocentric point of view allows us to analyze the implicit biopolitical aspects in biosemiotic concepts. This does not mean that we should revert back to a thoroughly negative understanding of biopolitics.

⁴⁵ The term “animalization” is here used not in the sense that human beings are reduced to the state of actual animal lives, but that a certain figure of non-human animality is constructed as opposing the human being, while nevertheless being operative within the human. Animalization refers to the understanding that this supposedly non-human aspect (instinct, passion, etc.) becomes to dominate over the human aspect (rationality), thus making it possible to view humans as “mere animals”. Thus, it is not a question of any actual animality, but of a figure of animality seen as dangerous to a properly human being.

and functional oppositions” (ibid.). The nutritive or vegetative function as the one common to all living beings – even to plants – is that which needs to be overcome in order for the human to become truly human. Agamben calls Aristotle’s articulation of life into functions and properties political since it is through the intellectual function, the *logos*, that the *polis* – the truly human form of association – is founded. Human politics – in which the human being is able to recognize itself as human – is founded upon the domination of *logos* over the nutritive, vegetative functions.

At first glance, biosemiotics seems to transcend this type of hierarchical division. Its manifest aim is to know what life knows (Kull 2009). To conceptualize the living process as semiosis means to understand it based on knowledge formation. To be a living being means, first and foremost, to interpret one’s environment (that is, to construct an *umwelt*) and to communicate with other living beings. When biosemiotics posits knowledge as the fundamental characteristic of all living beings, it seemingly goes beyond the traditional modern opposition between nature and human culture, an opposition where only the latter is endowed with meaning-making capacities (see Latour 1993; Descola 2013). Biosemiotics, in endowing all living beings with the capacity for knowledge, seems egalitarian in its ambitions. Nevertheless, the concept of the semiotic threshold can be read as reintroducing into forms of life a distinction between the human being as the most complete and complex living being and other living beings as mere precursors to human culture. Furthermore, the semiotic threshold makes it possible to locate this distinction within the human being itself.

While the lower semiotic threshold signifies the difference between life and non-life, animate and inanimate nature, the secondary semiotic thresholds articulate differences within life. Insofar as life in general is defined on the basis of semiosis, the differences need to be understood according to capacities of meaning-making. This is commonly done by conceptualizing a certain category of living beings through a specific type of sign. Kalevi Kull (2009b) relates Charles S. Peirce’s (1868) notions of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs to, respectively, vegetative, animal, and cultural levels of life.⁴⁶ These thresholds correspond roughly to the old Aristotelian division “between *anima vegetativa*, *anima sensitiva*, and *anima rationale*”, as acknowledged by Kull himself (2009b: 15). Vegetative life is capable of simple recognition via icons, animal life has the capacity of association via indexes, and the human cultural life is understood according to the use of symbolic signs, that is, language. While we are not dealing here with the traditional nature–culture divide in which only cultural living beings (that is, humans) are capable of meaning-making and,

⁴⁶ An update to the typology of sign relations characteristic of forms of life was made in Kull (2017), where the relation of imitation – the respective sign was named the “*emon*” – was added between indexical and symbolic semiosis. The correctness or exhaustiveness of the typology is not under scrutiny here, however, and thus it is sufficient simply to mention the fact that this typology is not complete, but is continuously being revised.

consequently, agency, this articulation of life into levels of semiosis nevertheless has the tendency to reconstruct the non-human as the not-yet-human. Furthermore, since all three levels of semiosis are operative within the human being (vegetative semiosis in the cellular level of the human organism, for example), we are perhaps again confronted with the same problem that Agamben identified: how to recognize the truly human within the human being?

The division of life according to different sign relations should not, however, in itself be read as an indication of a biopolitical function of biosemiotics: to understand the different sign relations characteristic to distinct forms of life simply opens up the possibility, in the end, to reconstruct the way in which living beings signify their world – that is, how they construct their *umwelt* (Kull 2009b; 2010; 2017). Conceptualizing certain forms of life, such as single cells, according to iconic relations simply capable of constituting a boundary between self and non-self means to understand the cell as an active agent of interpretation. The potential biopolitical aspects come into view when the semiotic thresholds are combined with concepts that attempt to articulate them into an order that almost always refers to the human being as a culmination point.

Such is the case for the concept of “semiotic freedom”, introduced by Jesper Hoffmeyer and signifying “the increase in richness of “depth” of meaning that can be communicated: From pheromones to birdsong and from antibodies to Japanese ceremonies of welcome” (1996: 61). “Semiotic freedom”, for Hoffmeyer, does not simply indicate the “quantitative mass of semiotic processes involved,” but the “quality of these processes” (1996: 62). Consequently, the qualitative differences between levels of semiosis indicate an increase in freedom of choice, in how a living being can possibly respond to “cues” proposed by the environment. When Hoffmeyer writes that “it is quite obvious that semiotic complexity or freedom has indeed attained higher levels in later stages, advanced species of birds and mammals in general being semiotically much more sophisticated than less advanced species” (2010: 196), he seems to indicate that evolution is to be conceptualized as a movement towards increasing semiotic freedom.

The type of semiosis that provides the most freedom is, of course, the symbolic – characteristic of human language. Terrence Deacon has conceptualized the human being in terms of “the symbolic species” in that the human has transcended indexical associations and gained the capacity for symbolic combination that has enabled humans to construct a “virtual” world of signs not confined to the physical one of bodies:

We live in a world that is both entirely physical and virtual at the same time. Remarkably, this virtual facet of the world came in to existence relatively recently, as evolutionary time is measured, and it has provided human selves with an unprecedented sort of autonomy or freedom to wander from the constraints of concrete reference, and a unique power for self-determination that derives from this increasingly indirect linkage between symbolic mental representation and its grounds of reference. (Deacon 1997: 454)

Becoming human means to gain a freedom that is not present in non-human animals who are tied to their physical worlds since they can only use indexical associations. Both Hoffmeyer and Deacon seem to conceptualize evolution as a movement towards becoming-human, and anthropogenesis seems to signify the overcoming of or transcending the non-human.

This directionality also has the tendency of being transformed into a teleology, which can be glimpsed in Frederik Stjernfelt's understanding of all sign types as potentially symbolic, that is, as containing within them the potentiality of becoming-a-symbol. Stjernfelt argues that semiotic evolution should not be articulated according to the progress from icons via indexes to symbols because they are not "mutually exclusive classes" of signs, but rather "form *aspects* of signs and may co-exist in empirical signs" (2012: 40). Based on this recognition, Stjernfelt proposes that we should instead speak of all signs in terms of "propositions" – even the simplest icons can express pragmatic truth and can thus be understood as "proto-propositions"; when speaking of biology, it is justified, for him, to speak of "natural propositions". He goes so far as to say that the highest of Peirce's sign types⁴⁷ – "propositions that form into arguments" – are present "from the beginning of biosemiosis, albeit in a rudimentary proto-form" (Stjernfelt 2012: 39). Consequently, even cellular semiosis should be conceptualized in terms of a linguistic argument expressing or articulating a "truth". This argument makes for a strange situation in which even a "case as simple as *E. Coli* swimming upstream in a sugar gradient [...] must be described as symbolic in Peirce's sense [...]" (Stjernfelt 2012: 41–42). Countering the articulation of semiosis into types from simplest to more complex, Stjernfelt argues, strikingly, that all types of sign activity must be understood according to a category of a specifically symbolic nature – the proposition.

While the differentiation of sign types into an evolutionary ladder tends to reproduce the image of the human being as the highest of animals towards whom all others have yet to evolve, the conceptualization of all sign activity according to propositions tends to present a very similar picture: all living beings, beginning from simple cells, are merely incomplete forms of human beings in that they use proto-propositions that have the potentiality to develop into proper propositions, or perhaps we should say – properly human propositions. Thus it appears that biosemiotics, at least in some of its forms, participates in the anthropological machine that cannot escape the question of what it means to be truly human. This recognition makes the employment of biosemiotic concepts to critical analyses of biopolitics more complicated than was presented in the joint article with Andreas Ventsel, "Biopolitics Meets Biosemiotics". There always remains a danger of dividing the human being into separately functioning parts operating according to iconic, indexical, or symbolic semiosis and of locating the properly human dimension solely on the symbolic level. Consequently, the biosemiotic vocabulary needs to be employed

⁴⁷ On arguments or Dicisigns, see CP 2.250–2.253; CP 2.309–2.314.

with care in order that it would not reproduce the nature–culture divide that makes it possible to animalize the human being.

4.2. The ambiguities of *umwelt*: freedom and plan

Another crucial biosemiotic concept to be put under scrutiny is that of the *umwelt*. In chapter 2, it was proposed that Foucault’s concept of the dispositive could be fruitfully complemented by Uexküll’s *umwelt*. The result was, on the one hand, that the dispositive would not be a simple technical apparatus of power, but could be conceptualized as the structuring of the material-semiotic *umwelt* in which the individual can possibly subjectivize him or herself; and on the other hand, the *umwelt* would then have to be rethought not as a space of which the subject is the center and creator of all meanings, but as a social space traversed by power relations and demanding specific types of subjectivity. That is, the *umwelt*-as-dispositive is not constructed merely by the subject’s perspective, but it has to be understood that that very perspective is constructed through semiotic power relations. Nevertheless, employing the concept of *umwelt* to complement the dispositive enabled us to further underscore the active participation of the subject in the construction of dispositives of power – the subject is not to be understood as reduced to a mere object in the biopolitical context, but as an agent who (re)constructs the ways of life simultaneously made possible and delimited by biopolitical discourses and technologies. The construction of subjectivity in the context of biopolitics always presupposes a degree of freedom and agency on the part of the subject.

It is at this point that we run into a problem. Namely, Uexküll has the tendency to underline the non-freedom of the subjects constructing their *umwelts*. This aspect has been underlined by Giorgio Agamben (2004) who interprets the concept of *umwelt* as itself operating as a sort of dispositive of biopolitics. Before we move on to Agamben, a few words on Uexküll. He resisted the mechanist perspective on life and living beings (see Brentari 2015: 47–54), stating, for example, that it would be deceptive to “concede to a mechanist, and not a biologist, the right to limit the study of the reality of all living organisms to the law of the Conservation of Energy” (Uexküll 1982: 26). For him, “Behaviors are not mere movements or tropisms [...]; they are not mechanically regulated, but meaningfully organized” (ibid.). Uexküll saw that meaning-making is characteristic of all living beings and in this sense his theoretical biology is fundamentally egalitarian: all living beings should be seen as creators of meaning not reducible to simple mechanical reflexes and reactions: “Depending upon its nature, the simplest reflex is a perception–effect operation, even if its arc only consists of a chain of individual nerve cells” (ibid., 34). His view that even the simplest reflex is of a semiotic nature – it presupposes the conferring of meaning upon that which is reacted to – leads him to postulate that even the simplest living beings possess an *umwelt*: “We are forced to attribute an Umwelt, however limited, to the free-living fungus-cells,

an Umwelt common to each of them, in which bacteria contrast with their surroundings, as meaning-carriers, as food and, in doing so, are perceived and acted upon” (ibid., 35). Extended in this manner, meaning-making becomes the foundational process of biology.

Uexküll describes the *umwelt* of living beings with the concept of “functional circle” according to which perception and action are joined in a holistic structure of meaning. An object becomes meaningful in such a way that it is now possible to act upon this object. It is in this sense that Uexküll speaks of “function”: “Because every behavior begins by creating a perceptual cue and ends by printing an effector cue on the same meaning-carrier, one may speak of a functional circle that connects the meaning-carrier with the subject” (1982: 31). Every behavior is a whole with its internal structure, the parts of which have no meaning separately (this is why behaviors cannot be taken apart into elements as the mechanist perspective demanded). If a human being sees a dog, s/he might pet it, run away from it, or observe it cautiously from a distance; a tick, on the other hand, does not even perceive a dog, but only the warmth of a mammal that indicates the animal’s suitability as a food source. There is thus not *one* world common to all living beings, but each has its own carved out “soap-bubble” which is not populated by things, but meaning-carrying objects.

The functional aspect of the *umwelt* is the point towards which Agamben directs his criticism by essentially saying that Uexküll equates the living being with its operation. Agamben interprets Uexküll’s (1957) famous account of the *umwelt* of the tick as consisting of merely three meaning-carriers: “1) the odor of the butyric acid contained in the sweat of all mammals; 2) the temperature of thirty-seven degrees corresponding to that of the blood of the mammals; 3) the typology of skin characteristic of mammals [...]” (Agamben 2004: 46). Agamben (2004: 47) reads Uexküll’s delineation of the *umwelt* of the tick as stating that the tick *is* the relationship between itself and these three elements – the tick is reduced to its functioning. Then, however, in Uexküll’s narrative, a surprising twist occurs: he informs us that “in the laboratory in Rostock, a tick was kept alive for eighteen years without nourishment, that is, in a condition of absolute isolation from its environment” (Agamben 2004: 47). While Uexküll simply states that a “tick can wait eighteen years” (1957: 12) for the source of food, Agamben remains puzzled; he asks, how can we speak of the subject of an *umwelt* when, in fact, there is no world in which it would be able to assume subjectivity: “How is it possible for a living being that consists entirely in its relationship with the environment to survive in absolute deprivation of that environment?” (2004: 47).

For Uexküll, each living being is captured into its *umwelt* similarly as into an Agambenian dispositive and is thus reduced to functioning. There is no escape, no freedom in this sense; the only freedom available for the subject of an *umwelt* is to confer (often pre-determined) meanings upon objects. Each species is fixed within its specific *umwelt* that is to a large part carved out by the organisms’ *Bauplan* or building plan which “determines what the living being perceives and how it acts, which elements of its perception and activity are

constant, and which ones may change in the course of its life” (Pobojevska 2001: 325). This is, of course, a quite obvious argument to make and it means simply to state that it is the physiology of a species that prescribes the manner in which it perceives the environment. Uexküll does not exempt human beings from these constrictions by saying that “we cannot go beyond the perimeter of our Umwelt” (1982: 72). This, again, simply means to state that human beings are no Cartesian thinking things but, in their formation of knowledge, are always to be conceptualized as embodied beings.

However, as Uexküll’s own writing evidences, the strict restrictions on meaning-making by the species-specific *umwelt* can assume biopolitical dimensions when applied to the understanding of society and culture. Uexküll’s book *Biology of the State* (1920) outlines a biological theory of state in which the latter should be understood along the lines of a literal body or an organism with its specific physiology and particular pathologies. Writing in post-World War I Germany, the main pathology of the state-body was identified by Uexküll as democracy, ineffectively instituted in the Weimar Republic (see Harrington 1999: 54–56). Indeed, in “On Aristocracy in Science and Politics” (2012 [1923]), Uexküll specifically calls for an aristocratic, expert government of society, stating that democracy, based on popular opinion and the demand for equality, should fall under ridicule in a similar way as democratic opinion has in science.

Uexküll’s *umwelt*-theory regards all subjective universes as equally complete and perfect: “all animals, from the simplest to the most complex, are fitted to their unique worlds with equal completeness. A simple world corresponds to a simple animal, a well-articulated world to a complex one” (1957: 11). It would thus seem that there is no distinction here between inferior and superior even on the inter-species level. Nevertheless, Uexküll begins at one point to speak about the incompatibility of *umwelts* in German society and state. In a letter to Houston Stewart Chamberlain in 1921, Uexküll writes: “The cohesive power of the Jewish Volk is admirable. For that, the Jews are completely incapable of building a state. All they produce is just a parasitic net that everywhere corrodes national structures and transforms the *Volk* into fermenting piles of pulp” (cited in Harrington 1999: 60). It thus seems that it is entirely possible – and corroborated by Uexküll himself – to divide the human species into incompatible *umwelts*, the conflict of which is up to the biopolitician to resolve.

When the biological, species-specific understanding of *umwelt* and *Bauplan* is extended to politics, it begins, in Uexküll’s political writings, to assume the role of differentiating between groups of humans who can possibly co-exist in a shared world. It was, of course, common at the beginning of the twentieth century in, for example, political science, social theory and social sciences to divide humanity into “races” with specific biological properties that made it impossible for different races to form a unified culture. Uexküll’s understanding of *umwelt* as a closed-off subjective world mapped onto this biopolitical division of humanity and called for an aristocratic-monarchical government that would keep the differing worlds functional. Groups of human beings were seen

in terms of distinct species with their own vital environments. As Agamben (2004: 42–43) and Harrington (1999: 68–71) both observe, Uexküll’s terminology used in the conceptualization of state biology is very close to Nazi eugenic politics.⁴⁸ In such a way, a seemingly neutral and even egalitarian perspective on biology can be employed for deadly biopolitical ends. Although Jonathan Beaver and Morten Tønnessen (2013: 445) contend that perhaps Uexküll’s science and his political and ethical views are not importantly related, their relatedness in Uexküll’s own political writings suggests that the concept of *umwelt* can itself function as a construction block in a biopolitical dispositive. Conceptualizing biosemiotics from a biopolitical perspective enables us to understand the connections between scientific and ethico-political thought.

Through the problematization of two biosemiotic concepts from the biopolitical perspective, at least some of the biopolitical aspects at play in biosemiotics have been brought out, although, of course, the analysis is far from complete and comprehensive. The primary conclusion being that applying biosemiotic concepts to biopolitical analysis is not as straightforward a task as might have been presented in the article “Biopolitics Meets Biosemiotics”. Any attempt at ordering and articulating life according to divisions seen as immanent to living beings eventually run into the danger of hierarchization, or in other words, positing some properties as more relevant and others as subjugated to the former. Through the concept of the semiotic threshold, biosemiotics runs the risk of reproducing the age-old exceptionality of the human being in the use of symbolic signs. The concept of the *umwelt* has been historically used by Uexküll himself in defense of aristocratic politics that poses some ways of life as superior to others. The main takeaway here is that biosemiotics can be scrutinized through the biopolitical lens; and this means that in future research their connections should remain problematic rather than presupposing a unilateral movement from science to politics.

⁴⁸ It must be underlined, however, that Uexküll did not support Hitler’s politics of racial purification, instead stressing the importance of the value of individual lives (see Brentari 2015: 38–43).

CONCLUSION

The aim of the introductory part was to conceptualize the connections between the critical analysis of biopolitics and semiotics. From the biopolitical perspective, the introduction (and the thesis in general) focuses on the thought of Michel Foucault. This, firstly, for the simple reason that it is from there that all the following, multi-faceted, and voluminous discussion of biopolitics springs from. It was necessary to return to the source, so to speak, in order to delineate more clearly what can be understood under the concept of biopolitics. Following Foucault's proposals, biopolitics can be analyzed through the concepts of subjectification—subjectivation, dispositive, and normalization. The second reason of the choice to focus on Foucault's work is that his approach is inherently compatible with a semiotic perspective on social relations and the self-construction of the subject. By interpreting biopolitics in the context of Foucault's more general framework of power, it was shown that biopolitical government is always mediated by semiotic activity and does not signify, first and foremost, the direct subjugation of life to sovereign power. Instead, biopolitics is to be interpreted as a form of productive power, productive of social subjectivity through normalization.

The construction of norms is always a semiotic activity, mediated by signs. The construction of "normal" behavior that connects biological processes with morality is essentially the production of ways of being, of possible trajectories for subjectivation. This is why the Foucauldian approach was set into dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's and Hannah Arendt's understanding of biopolitics, both of whom see biopolitics as the reduction of human beings to a mere state of survival in which political action becomes impossible. That is, they understand biopolitics as negative, as depriving human beings of their political nature. Arendt's concept of the social signifies essentially that human beings are condemned to reproducing the life of the population, to a laboring behavior that strips them of their freedom. Agamben's view of the concept of dispositive is reductive in the sense that it relies too heavily on techno-determinist thinking, reducing human beings to simple cogs in the machine, again condemned to the reproduction of apparatuses of power.

A more productive view of the concept of dispositive for the analysis of biopolitics was put forward by connecting Foucault's understanding of dispositive and Jakob von Uexküll's conceptualization of *umwelt*. It was argued that normalization is primarily a regularization of behavior within the population's milieu, a structuration of the milieu in which behavior occurs. The concept of *umwelt* helped to stress that this structuration always passes through the subjective dimension, it orders the social subjective universe of human beings. On the other hand, Uexküll's understanding of the subject as the sole giver of meanings needed to be decentered and connected to the ways in which, through biopolitical management, certain modes of behavior are, through governmental practices, strategically given more significance than others. That is, subjecti-

vation in the social *umwelt* of human beings always occurs saturated with pre-existing subjectifications – this means that, through techniques of power/knowledge, subjectivity is always-already to a certain degree objectified.

This does not mean, however, that the analysis of biopolitics should be simply reduced to the review of “objective subjectivities” constructed in dispositives of power. This would mean that the dimension of freedom in the construction of social subjectivity is forgotten altogether. The ambiguity of the subject – as always both an active agent and an always-already objectified living being – must be maintained also in the analysis of biopolitics. This means that biopolitics should not be considered as a totalized dispositive of power encompassing the whole of human behavior. It should be acknowledged that within any given society, a multiplicity of dispositives is simultaneously operative within agonistic relations to each other. That is, that normalization does not occur within a single biopolitical dispositive, but is always local and contingent. Freedom in the context of biopolitics is thus not, in the first place, to be sought in the agential capacities of “life itself”, but in the contingent nature of biopolitical dispositives.

The analysis of biopolitics and the dispositives of power led to a problematization of a couple of biosemiotic concepts. The transfer of concepts from life sciences to political analysis always presents a danger as they do not, in themselves, carry any political values, but can be used and abused according to the strategic ends of a certain politics. That is, they can be used as elements within dispositives of power. While not providing any conclusive statements, the concepts of the semiotic threshold and *umwelt* were reconsidered from the perspective of biopolitics by asking – do those concepts themselves not participate in the biopolitical ordering and articulation of life into hierarchies, which enable the division of living beings into improper and proper characteristics of life?

The introductory part of the thesis proposed a semiotic perspective on biopolitics that underlined a twofold necessity. Firstly, it would be necessary to examine the whole set of relations operative within certain dispositives, be they linguistic or non-linguistic semiotic relations. The articles included in the thesis mainly deal with discourse, that is, with linguistic meaning-making. Secondly, it would be necessary to investigate resistance in the context of biopolitical dispositives. While the articles mostly consider the aspect of subjectification, future research should also turn to subjectivation – e.g., through the concept of technologies of the self – as a form of resistance. Conceptualizing resistance along the lines of subjectivation enables us to think of it not as opposed to power relations, but as immanent to power. A twofold perspective for future research, then – to examine subjectivation in the context of biopolitical dispositives in all its semiotic dimensions.

OVERVIEW OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

I Biopolitics, Surveillance, and the Subject of ADHD. The aim of the article is to investigate how an individual human being is inserted into the larger social order and population through the techniques of biopolitics and surveillance. It does this using as an illustration the way in which the subject is constructed in relation to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Special attention is paid to surveillance and its biopolitical nature. Surveillance techniques can be seen as the implementation and realization of biopolitics that are used to create knowledge of populations. In relation to ADHD, the main goal of surveillance is to ensure treatment adherence. Through this demand, the individual is expected to subjectivize him or herself as obedient to the norms constructed on the level of the population. As such, the subject, while being dependent on the norms of the population, is not entirely objectified by the statistical and psychological norms – by the average “normal” individual –, but is, in fact, expected to participate in his or her own normalization whether through medications or other forms of therapy. The article is thus an example of the argument that biopolitics operates through subjectivation and by making possible certain ways of being in a society (see also chapters 1 and 2 of the introductory part).

II Why Does ‘Normalization’ Matter to Political Semiotics? The paper begins with the observation that the semiotics of power or political semiotics has been, so far, confined to discourse analysis concentrating mostly on linguistic expression through which the opposition between self and other is constructed. The article argues political semiotics would benefit of an integration with Michel Foucault’s analysis of biopolitical normalization which is framed by the concept of the dispositive (dealt with further in chapter 2 of the introductory part). This approach would help political semiotics to move beyond the analysis of the self/other dichotomy and take into account, also, non-linguistic modes of signification. Foucault’s approach to three general types of power and the types of normalization dominant in each of them are mapped out. It is Foucault’s conviction that normalization in the strict sense – that is, the construction of norms that are immanent to vital processes – appears in the biopolitical dispositive of security which differs from sovereign as well as disciplinary power. While sovereign power codifies norms into juridical rules and disciplinary power imposes external norms onto bodies, the biopolitical dispositive of security constructs statistical norms measured from the “natural” activity of the population. Normalization in the context of biopolitics thus signifies, first and foremost, the construction of norms as “natural” to populations and individuals. And the construction of norms as immanent and natural to life occurs within the dispositive, a network of heterogeneous elements, which goes beyond the constructions of the community through the self/other opposition. This is ultimately the reason why the analysis of

normalization in dispositives would be complementary to political semiotics, showing how the construction of “natural” norms is inherently politicizing.

III Surviving Finitude: Survival as a Constructed Foundation of Identity.

The article deals with the biopolitical underpinnings of the Estonian national identity construction which is analyzed by concentrating on public media coverage of, firstly, the Estonian Population and Housing Census 2011, and secondly, the passing of the Registered Partnership Act in 2014. The object of analysis is the discourse emerging from the statements made about and surrounding these cases. The discourse is called the “discourse of survival”, since here the survival of identity appears as the fundamental ground of national identity construction. National identity is, in this way, put on the same level with “life” – the survival of identity means simultaneously the survival of a properly “Estonian” and “traditional” way of life. Survival is not treated in the article as the “animal” dimension of human life – that is, as the reduction of human life to animality –, but as a mode of sociocultural self-description that connects collective identity to biopolitical concerns of population management. The constructed need for survival is constructed in the analyzed discourse according to the semiotic logic of presentist auto-communication, a logic which demands that, in order to persevere, national identity must stay the same (that is, “traditional”) throughout historical transformations. Future appears as a simple expansion of the present, the latter of which is authenticated by the construction of past “traditionality”. In this particular mode of self-description, national identity is constructed along the lines of a finite form of life whose sole purpose is to resist death. Consequently, the security of (“traditional”) life dominates any positive constructions of collective identity, of being together as a collective. The article presents one possible biopolitical mode of subjectivation provided in public political discourse – one, “traditional”, way of becoming an Estonian is to constantly concern oneself with one’s survival.

IV Biopolitics Meets Biosemiotics: The Semiotic Thresholds of Anti-Aging

Interventions (co-authored by Andreas Ventsel). The article attempts to argue for the relevance of biosemiotic concepts to the analyses of biopolitics. This is by no means a straightforward task, since biosemiotics strives to order and understand life from a new – semiotic – perspective and biopolitical analysis strives to provide a critique of any such orderings (this view is dealt with in chapter 4 of the introductory part). Nevertheless, the article shows that the concept of the semiotic threshold could provide useful insights in understanding biopolitical subjectivity. Adopting a biosemiotic perspective, the latter could no longer be conceptualized according to the category of the person but should instead be delineated along the lines of an organism within its *umwelt*. The lower semiotic threshold signifies the distinction between the semiotic and the non-semiotic, which according to biosemiotics simultaneously signifies the distinction between the animate and the inanimate. Semiosis emerges with life. The secondary semiotic thresholds mark the border between types of semiosis,

ordered from the simplest (iconic) to the most complex (symbolic). While political subjectivity has commonly been conceptualized on the symbolic (that is, linguistic and human) level, turning our attention to other types of meaning-making enables us to conceptualize political subjectivity as encompassing bodily and vital processes. In addition to the biosemiotic notions of types of meaning-making, Georges Canguilhem's concept of normativity is employed in the article (further discussed in chapter 2 of the introductory part). The politicization of even the simplest meaning-making processes is illustrated through an analysis of anti-aging discourse.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Biopoliitilisest subjektsusest: Michel Foucault' käsitus biopoliitikast ning selle semiootilised tahud

Doktoritöö üldiseks eesmärgiks on analüüsida Michel Foucault' käsitlust biopoliitikast ning selle võimalikke kokkupuutepunkte semiootikaga. Töö koosneb neljast teadusartiklist ning artikleid raamivast osast, mis liigendub omakorda neljaks suuremaks peatükiks. Raamiv osa ei ole kirjutatud lihtsa kokkuvõttena artiklite argumentidest, vaid seab endale eesmärgiks ka nende edasiarendamise.

Termin "biopoliitika" võeti kasutusele 20. sajandi esimese poole organitsistlikus poliitikateaduses, mil ta viitas eluteaduste olulisusele riigikorralduse ja -valitsemise jaoks (Esposito 2008: 16–17; Lemke 2011: 9–10). Elu mõiste ning eluteadused seati selleks aluseks, millelt poliitika peaks lähtuma. Ehkki organitsistlik perspektiiv riigile ja ühiskonnale on ammu vananenud, ei tähenda see, et eluteaduseid ning bioloogilist modelleerimist ei peetaks tänapäevalgi poliitikaanalüüside jaoks oluliseks (vt nt Hatemi ja McDermott 2011).

Doktoritöö asetub aga teistsugusesse – kriitilisse – perspektiivi. Selle algatajaks võib pidada prantsuse mõtlejat Michel Foucault'd, kes hakkas biopoliitikast kõnelema 1970ndate keskel ning kelle järgi tähistab biopoliitika seda "mehhanismide kogumit, mille abil muudeti inimliigi bioloogilised omadused poliitilise strateegia objektiks" (Foucault 2009: 1). Tema eesmärgiks oli mõista seda valitsuslikku loogikat, mille alusel inimese bioloogiline elu rakendatakse poliitika teenistusse ning sisestatakse võimusuhetesse. Kriitiline vaatepunkt võtab arusaama, et elu ja eluteadused toimivad poliitika ja riigikorralduse vundamedina, oma uurimisobjektiks.

Olgugi et Foucault' võimukäsitus on oluliselt mõjutanud nii kultuurilist pööret ühiskonnateadustes üldiselt (Nash 2001) kui ka võimusemiootikat (Selg ja Ventsel 2008), ei ole semiootikas biopoliitikale erilist tähelepanu osutatud. Põhjuseks võib olla asjaolu, et biopoliitilist valitsemist peetakse otseselt kehasse ja bioloogilistesse protsessidesse sekkuvaks – mistõttu toimiks see justkui semiootilise vahendusega. Doktoritöö seab sellise vaatepunkti kahtluse alla, mõtestades biopoliitikat Foucault' laiema võimukäsitluse raames, mille järgi on võimusuhted ühiskondlikes suhetes immanentsed ning toimivad alati vahenduse kaudu.

Töö raamiva osa esimene peatükk keskendubki Foucault' üldisema võimukäsitluse semiootilistele aspektidele. Foucault' järgi ei allutata inimindiviidid sugugi mingile välisele võimule, vaid võim toimib subjektistamise ja subjektivatsooni kaudu. Võimusuhe ei ole midagi väljaspoolset nt perekondlikest, tööalastest, seksuaalsetest suhetest – just neis suhetes endis kehtestatakse subjektipositsioonid, kus inimene muudetakse valitsetavaks. Võimusuhetes kehtestatakse võimalikud ühiskondlikud olemisviisid, sealhulgas "õiged" viisid olla ühiskondlik subjekt. Valitsemine tähistab Foucault' jaoks tegutsemise struktu-

reerimist võimalike olemisviiside väljal (vt nt 1982). Valitsemine tähendab niisiis ka seda, et indiviididelt oodatakse teatud vastust ja valikut, st vabadust – indiviid ei subjektiveeru automaatselt selliseks nagu teatud valitsusparadigma ette näeb, vaid loob end aktiivselt valitsuslikkuse kontekstis. Võimusuhe on seega semiootiline ning eeldab aktiivsust käitumisvälja struktureerituse tingimustes.

Teine peatükk liigub edasi otseselt biopoliitika juurde. Siin määratletakse biopoliitika ühiskondlikke elamisviise normaliseeriva valitsusviisina. Biopoliitilises valitsemises konstrueeritakse ühiskondlikke suhteid ning indiviidide ja kogukondade võimalikke elamisviise normaliseerimise alusel. Valitsemine normi alusel viitab juba otseselt vahendatusele ning norm on fundamentaalselt semiootiline nähtus, st märgiline konstruktsioon. Tegemist ei ole mitte otsese bioloogilistesse protsessidesse sekkumise või vägivallaga, vaid olemisviisi defineerimisega. Normaliseerimise toel ühendatakse ühiskondlik-poliitiline ja “looduslik/loomulik”. Peamise vahendina, mille alusel biopoliitilist normalisatsiooni analüüsida, käsitletakse Foucault’ välja pakutud dispositiivi mõistet. Foucault’ määratleb dispositiivi heterogeensete elementide võrgustikuna, mida rakendatakse teatud strateegilisel eesmärgil, st mingi (ühiskondlik-poliitilise) probleemi – nt kuritegevus, hullumeelsus, epideemia jne – lahendamiseks (Foucault 1980b: 194–195; Agamben 2009). Dispositiivi mõistet laiendatakse siin Jakob von Uexküllli (1926; 1957[1934]; 1982[1940]) käsitlusega omailmast. Omailm kui subjektiivne universum võimaldab rõhutada biopoliitika subjektiivset aspekti – st biopoliitiline valitsemine mitte otseselt elule mõjuvana ning elu mõjutavana, vaid subjekti maailma konstrueerivana, seda normide loomise kaudu. Kui aga, vastupidi, vaadata omailma käsitlust dispositiivi mõiste perspektiivist, oleme sunnitud tunnistama, et subjekt ei saa enam olla tähenduste alus ja alguspunkt, vaid alati juba võimusuhetesse ning juba tähendustatud-struktureeritud maailma sisestatud tegutseja. Omailma mõiste võimaldab mõtestada subjektiivatsiooni (kuidas subjekt end aktiivselt konstrueerib), samas kui dispositiivi mõiste võimaldab näha, et subjekt peab seda tegema juba alati subjektistatult, st suhestuma ja vastama juba olemasolevatele normaliseeritud ja normaliseeritavatele subjektipositsioonidele, mis on konstitueeritud võimusuhetes. Omailma-käsitlusele annab lisamõõtme Georges Canguilhemi normatiivsuse mõiste, mille abil on võimalik mõista, et elusolend säilitab ka normaliseeritud keskkonnas võime “eksida”, st oma käitumist ja tähenduslikku maailma muuta.

Kolmas peatükk heidab pilgu nägemusele biopoliitikast kui vabadust ja valikut hävitavast valitsusviisist. Hannah Arendt (1998[1958]) käsitleb elu sisenemist poliitikasse inimese täieliku normaliseerimisena, milles inimindiviid taandatakse seisundile, milles poliitiline tegutsemisvabadus (mõtestatud Aristotelese põhjal) ei ole enam võimalik ning alles on jäänud kõigest enese elu käitumuslik taastootmine. Arendt vastandab poliitika – tegutsemisvabadust võimaldav suhevorm – sotsiaalsusele kui pelgalt bioloogilisele vajadusele suunatud käitumisviisile. Kui bioloogia või kehalisus poliitikasse siseneb, ei ole vabadus enam võimalik. Giorgio Agambenile (1998; 2005; 2016) on omane sarnane

seisukoht, nimelt et poliitiline vabadus ei ole biopoliitikas võimalik. Arendtile vastupidiselt mõtestab Agamben biopoliitilist võimu täieliku erandi terminites. Inimene on biopoliitilise valitsemise kontekstis alati paljastatud suveräänse võimu surmavale vägivallale. See tähendab, et oluline ei ole mitte norm ja normaliseeritus, vaid suverääni võime erandkorras igal hetkel inimelu väärtuse üle otsustada. Nii Arendt kui Agamben mõistavad biopoliitikat justkui totaalse võimuna, millele on võimalik vastu panna vaid sellest täielikult välja astudes. Peatükis argumenteeritakse, et Foucault' vaatepunkt, mis seab esikohale vastu-panu dispositiivi kontekstis, on semiootilise analüüsi perspektiivist viljakam, kuna võimaldab meil ka keskenduda spetsiifilistele võimu- ning eneseloome-technikatele kui vähemalt teatud määral vabadust eeldavatele praktikatele – lõppkokkuvõttes seega ka semiootilist vahendust eeldavatele praktikatele. Biopoliitikat ei tohiks käsitleda totaalse võimuna, mis võtab elu täielikult enese haardesse ning millest ei ole seega väljapääsu.

Kui eelnevalt katsuti mõtestada seda, kuidas biopoliitikat semiootiliselt mõistetavaks ja analüüsivaks teha, siis raamiva osa neljas ja viimane peatükk võtab vaatluse alla kaks biosemiootilist mõistet ning analüüsib neid kriitilise biopoliitika-analüüsi vaatepunktist. Nendeks kaheks mõisteks on semiootiline lävi ning omaloom. Mõlema kohta küsitakse: kas nad mitte ei osale potentsiaalselt biopoliitises diskursuses, mis eeldab eluviiside ja -vormide teatavasse hierarhiasse asetamist, mille kõrgeimaks astmeks seatakse enamjaolt inimene. Enamgi veel, tihti osutub, et sellise hierarhia kehtestamine võimaldab inimese ja inimliigi siseseltki kehtestada liikumise madalamast kõrgema eluvormini, mis viib selleni, et inimest on võimalik taandada n-ö madalamate protsesside (metabolismi, geneetika, kirgede jne) “orjaks” – st lõppeks, mitte-päris-ratsionaalseks inimeseks. Analüüsides biosemiootilisi mõisteid biopoliitika vaatepunktist, saame paremini mõista neid ohte, mis kaasnevad eluteaduste mõistete rakendamisega poliitiliste protsesside analüüsis.

Töö raamiv osa keskendub seega biopoliitika ja semiootika võimalikele kokkupuutepunktidele kahesuunaliselt. Esiteks, kuidas mõtestada biopoliitikat semiootilisest vaatepunktist. Teiseks, kuidas võiks kriitiline analüüs biopoliitikat olla kasulik semiootiliste mõistete võimalike poliitiliste aspektide mõtestamisel. Lisaks käsitleb see üldteoreetilisemalt artiklites kasutatud lähenemisi ja mõisteid. Järgnevalt esitan lühikese kokkuvõtte doktoritöösse kaasatud artiklitest.

I artikkel “Biopoliitika, järelevalve ning aktiivsus- ja tähelepanuhäire subjekt” (Biopolitics, Surveillance, and the Subject of ADHD) uurib seda, kuidas inimindiviid sisestatakse laiemasse sotsiaalse korra ja populatsiooni konteksti biopoliitiliste järelevalvetechnikate alusel. Näitena kasutatakse neid viise, kuidas käib subjekti konstrueerimine suhestatuna aktiivsus- ja tähelepanuhäirega. Suurema tähelepanu all on järelevalve ning selle biopoliitilised aspektid. Järelevalvetechnikaid võib mõista populatsiooni kohta teadmist konstrueeriva biopoliitika rakendusena. Aktiivsus- ja tähelepanuhäire puhul on järelevalve peamiseks eesmärgiks kindlustada, et inimesed ettekirjutatud ravist kinni peaksid. Selle nõudmise alusel peab inimene end subjektiveerima kuulekana

populatsiooni-tasandi normidele. Subjekt ei saa siin aga täielikult objektiveeritud, vaid peab end looma statistiliste ja psühholoogiliste normide alusel – ta peab end aktiivselt normaliseerima. Artikkel on seega näide sellest, kuidas biopoliitika toimib subjektivatsiooni teel, tehes nähtavaks ja vajalikuks teatud ühiskondlikud olemisviisid (vt ka raamiva osa teine peatükk).

II artikkel “Miks on ‘normalisatsioon’ poliitilisele semiootikale oluline?” (Why Does ‘Normalization’ Matter to Political Semiotics?) algab tõdemusega, et nii võimusemiootika kui ka poliitiline semiootika on siiani piirdunud diskursuseanalüüsiga, mis keskendub “oma” ja “võõrast” eristavate keeleliste lausungite uurimisele. Artikli eesmärgiks on näidata, et poliitilisele semiootikale tuleks kasuks Michel Foucault’ biopoliitilise normalisatsiooni käsitluse kasutamine, käsitluse, mille põhimõisteks on dispositiiv (vt ka teine peatükk töö raamivast osast). See lähenemine võimaldaks poliitilisel semiootikal minna kaugemale oma/võõra piiride kehtestamise analüüsist – samuti tuleks arvestada ka mitte-keelise tähenduslaade. Normalisatsioon tähistab biopoliitilises kontekstis esmajoonel populatsioonidele “loomulike” normide konstrueerimist. Normide konstrueerimine elu(viiside)le immanentse ja loomulikuna toimib dispositiivi, hetegoreensete elementide võrgustiku, kontekstis. Mis tähendab, et tegemist ei ole kõigest keeleliste konstruktsioonidega. Seega, näidates, et “loomulike” normide konstrueerimine on poliitiline tegevus, oleks normalisatsiooni mõiste poliitilisele semiootikale oluline. Eluviiside mõtestamine normide alusel tähendab nende poliitikasse sisestamist.

III artikkel “Lõplikkuse ületamine: ellujäämine identiteedi konstrueeritud alusena” (Surviving Finitude: Survival as a Constructed Foundation of Identity) tegeleb Eesti rahvusliku identiteedi loome biopoliitiliste aspektidega. Seda analüüsitakse kahe juhtumi meediakajastuse alusel: 1) 2011. rahvaloendus ja 2) kooseluseaduse vastuvõtmine 2014. aastal. Täpsemalt analüüsitakse avalikku diskursust, mis nende juhtumite kohta käib. Neist avalikest sõnavõttudest koorub välja teatud “ellujäämise diskursus”, mis asetab identiteedi ellujäämise keskele kohale ning seab selle tähtsamaks igasugusest positiivsest nägemusest, milline see identiteet õigupoolest olema peaks. Identiteet ja “elu” hakkavad siin samastuma: kui jääb ellu identiteet, püsib hinges ka rahvas. Ellujäämist ei käsitleta siin lihtsa “loomaliku” inimelu mõõtmena – st kui inimelu taandamist loomalikkusele –, vaid ühe võimaliku sotsiokultuurilise enesekirjeldusviisina, mis ühendab kollektiivse identiteedi biopoliitiliste, populatsiooni valitsemise, eesmärkidega. Konstrueeritud ellujäämisvajadus kehtestatakse analüüsitud diskursuses presentistliku auto-kommunikatsiooni loogika alusel. See loogika nõuab, et jätkumiseks peab rahvuslik identiteet püsima läbi aja(loo) samana. See tähendab ka, et tulevikku mõtestatakse lihtsalt oleviku jätkuna. Olevik aga viitab pidevalt “traditsioonilistele” eluviisidele, mis konstrueeritakse olevikulisest vaatepunktist otseku eestlusele loomulikuna – ka minevik on kõigest oleviku pikendus. Rahvuslik identiteet konstrueeritakse lõpliku eluvormina, mille esmaseks eesmärgiks on surma vältimine. Ellujäämine on tähtsam kui identiteedi positiivsed konstruktsioonid. Artikkel esitab ühe võimaliku biopoliitilise subjektivatsiooniviisi, mis kehtestatakse avalikus diskursuses – “tradit-

siooniline” viis saada eestlaseks tähendab pidevalt muretseda oma ellujäämise pärast.

IV artikkel “Biopoliitika kohtub biosemiootikaga: vananemisvastane diskursus ja semiootilised läved” (Biopolitics Meets Biosemiotics: The Semiotic Threshold(s) of Anti-Aging Interventions, kaasautor Andreas Ventsel) küsib, kuidas oleks biosemiootilisi mõisteid võimalik kasutada biopoliitilistes analüüsid. Tegemist ei ole sugugi sirgjoonelise ettevõtmisega, kuna biosemiootika eesmärgiks pole ei rohkemat ega vähemat kui elust uue – semiootilise – arusaamise loomine, samas kui biopoliitika analüüsid tegelevad enamjaolt just taoliste katsete kriitikaga. Sellegipoolest argumenteerib artikkel, et semiootilise läve mõiste võiks olla kasulik biopoliitilise subjektsuse mõistmisele. Omandades biosemiootilise perspektiivi, ei saa subjektsust enam mõista isiku paradigmat lähtudes, vaid peaks olema mõistetud elusolendina oma spetsiifilise maailma. Ehkki poliitilist subjektsust on enamjaolt mõtestatud sümbolilise semioosi tasandil, st keeleliselt ja inimlikult, saaksime nii ikoonilise kui ka indeksiaalse semioosi käsitlemise abil poliitilise subjektsuse mõistesse haarata ka kehalised ja bioloogilised protsessid. See tähendaks kogu organismi normatiivsuse Georges Canguilhem'i mõistes (vt ka teine peatükk raamivast osast) kaasamist. Eri tasandite tähendusloomeprotsesside politiseerimist illustreeritakse vananemisvastase diskursuse näitel.

PUBLICATIONS

CURRICULUM VITAE

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2011–2013 University of Tartu, Semiotics and Culture Studies, master's studies, MA *cum laude*
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Further education

2017 May Juri Lotman and Sociosemiotics in Elva, Estonia, Spring School
2017 February Biopower and Semiotics of the Body in Kääriku, Estonia, Winter School of Biopolitics
2014 autumn Université Paris 8, Paris, France, visiting student

Employment

2017–2019 Junior Research Fellow, Department of Semiotics, University of Tartu
2016–2017 Lecturer of Semiotics of Culture (P2VK.05.190) in Viljandi Culture Academy
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2015 Lecturer of Authorial Semiotics III (FLSE.00.238) in Tartu University
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Research topics

Political philosophy, social theory, critical theory, political semiotics, biopolitics

Acknowledgments

2018 Juri Lotman stipend

Selected publications

- Puumeister, Ott; Ventsel, Andreas 2018. Biopolitics Meets Biosemiotics: The Semiotic Threshold(s) of Anti-Aging Interventions. *Theory, Culture & Society* 35(1): 117–139.
- Puumeister, Ott 2018. Surviving Finitude: Survival as a Constructed Foundation of Identity. *Sign Systems Studies* 46(1): 90–116.
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- Puumeister, Ott 2014. Biopolitics, Surveillance, and the Subject of ADHD. *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* 202: 301–320.
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- Puumeister, Ott 2012. Subjekti eneseloome võimusuhetes: Agambeni, Badiou ja Foucault’ subjektsusetooriad semiootilisest vaatepunktist. *Acta Semiotica Estica* 9: 11–41.
- Puumeister, Ott 2011. Subjekti konstrueerimine järelevalvesüsteemides. *Acta Semiotica Estica* 8: 51–73.

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Hariduskäik

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2004–2007 Tartu Ülikool, bakalaureuseõpe, Kirjandus ja kultuuriteadused,
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Täiendavad koolitused

2017 mai Juri Lotman ja sotsiosemiootika, kevadkool Elvas
2017 veebruar Biovõim ja kehasemiootika, talvekool Käärikul
2014 sügis külalisüliõpilane ülikoolis Université Paris 8 Pariisis
Prantsusmaal

Teenistuskäik

2017–2019 Tartu Ülikool, Semiootika osakond, nooremteadur
2016–2017 Viljandi Kultuuriakadeemia, õppejõud, Kultuurisemiootika
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2015 Tartu Ülikool, vastutav õppejõud, Autorisemiootika III
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biopoliitika

Tunnustused

2018 Juri Lotmani stipendium

Olulisemad publikatsioonid

Puumeister, Ott; Ventsel, Andreas 2018. Biopolitics Meets Biosemiotics: The
Semiotic Threshold(s) of Anti-Aging Interventions. *Theory, Culture & So-*
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DISSERTATIONES SEMIOTICAE UNIVERSITATIS TARTUENSIS

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