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Life and Death as Objects of Government: Rethinking the Thresholds of Biopolitical Rationality

Kamuran Gökdağ

ORCID: 0000-0003-1753-6496 | E-Mail: kamurangokdag@artuklu.edu.tr

Assoc. Prof., Mardin Artuklu University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Philosophy

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Abstract

This article traces a single ontological shift, from governing life through death to governing death through life. By reconstructing an archaeology of power across three constitutive thresholds, it asks how death came to function as a technical variable internal to the organization of life itself, moving beyond approaches that treat death primarily as the ultimate act of sovereign violence. At the Hobbesian threshold, death concentrates in the sovereign's singular decision, the condition through which political order first becomes possible. At the biopolitical threshold, this logic gives way to making live and letting die, and death disperses as a governmental variable across the biological processes of the population. At the neo-Hobbesian biopolitical threshold, regimes of diffusion and concentration supersede this logic, and death becomes an immanent regulatory principle, circulating along multiple trajectories while intensifying at specific points, from insurance calculus to border regimes, camps, and sieges. Read through Hobbes, Schmitt, Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe together, these thresholds reveal a necropolitical return, the raw core of sovereign violence, never eliminated but only thinned and redistributed, resurfacing at the very heart of contemporary biopower. The article argues that this trajectory inaugurates a political ontology in which life and death are recalibrated within a single calculative framework, with death becoming the constitutive principle through which life is differentially produced, preserved, and abandoned.

Keywords: Sovereignty, Biopolitics, Necropolitics, Governmentality, Political Ontology of Death.

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Bir Yönetim Nesnesi Olarak Hayat ve Ölüm: Biyopolitik Bir İktidar Arkeolojisi

Kamuran Gökdağ

ORCID: [0000-0003-1753-6496](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1753-6496) | E-Mail: kamurangokdag@artuklu.edu.tr

Doç. Dr., Mardin Artuklu Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Felsefe Bölümü

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Öz

Bu çalışma, ölüm ile hayat arasındaki ilişkinin modern siyasal rasyonalitelere geçirdiği ontolojik dönüşümü, iktidar arkeolojisinin sunduğu analitik çerçeve içinde üç kurucu eşik üzerinden analiz ediyor ve ölümün bizzatı hayatın işleyişine içkin bir teknik değışkene nasıl dönüştüğünü sorguluyor. Hobbesçu eşikte ölüm, egemenin tekil “öldürme hakkı”nda yoğunlaşarak siyasal düzenin ilk kez mümkün hale geldiği kurucu koşulu oluşturur. Biyo-politik eşikte bu mantık yerini “yaşatma” ve “ölüme bırakma”ya bırakır. Bu eşikte ölüm artık doğrudan bir şiddet nesnesi değil, nüfusun biyolojik süreçleri boyunca dağıtılan yönetsel bir değışkene dönüşür. Neo-Hobbesçu biyo-politik eşikte ise dağılım ve yoğunlaşma rejimleri bu mantığın yerini alır. Bu eşikte ölüm, sigorta hesaplamalarından sınır rejimlerine, kamplara ve kuşatmalara kadar uzanan çoklu hatlar boyunca yayılan, belirli eşiklerde yoğunlaşan içkin bir düzenleme ilkesi olarak kavranır. Ölüm burada, egemen şiddetin nihai edimi olarak gören yerleşik okumanın çok ötesine taşınır. Schmitt, Foucault, Agamben ve Mbembe birlikte okunduğunda bu eşikler Hobbesscu bir geri dönüşü açığa çıkarır. Çünkü hiçbir zaman tümüyle ortadan kalkmayan, yalnızca seyreliip yeniden dağıtılan egemen şiddetin ham çekirdeği, çağdaş biyo-iktidarın tam merkezinde yeniden yüzeye çıkar. Makale nihayetinde şu iddiayı ileri sürer: “Hayatı ölümlle yönetmekten” “ölümü hayatla yönetmeye” doğru meydana gelen bu kayma, hayat ile ölümün tek bir hesaplama çerçevesi içinde yeniden ayarlandığı bir siyasal ontolojiye açılır. Bu siyasal ontolojide ölüm, hayatın farklılaştırılarak üretildiği, korunduğu ve terk edildiği kurucu ayrıştırma mantığı olarak işler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Egemenlik, Biyo-politika, Nekro-politika, Yönetimsellik, Ölüm, Siyasal Ontolojisi

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Introduction

Conceptions of death, together with the ontological limits that make life meaningful, expose where political power concentrates its regulatory capacity and marks out its own boundaries. Every conception of death carries a vision of being, value, and political order exceeding mere biological finitude, producing an ontological decision, explicit or implicit, about life's value, the subject's constitution, and the limits of political intervention. Pre-modern thought never conceived of death uniformly, yet consistently treated it as a threshold binding life's modes of existence together. In ancient Greek thought, death discloses being's relation to truth, which is why Plato describes philosophy as preparation for death (Plato, 2002, 64a–64b, p. 8), while Aristotle organizes political life around the *telos* of the good life, whose significance emerges precisely in the face of death (Aristotle, 2002, 1252a-1252b-30, pp. 1-3). In theological and mystical traditions, death marks not an end but a passage to a deeper order of existence; Islamic philosophers likewise treat it as a change of rank within being rather than an end (Kaya, 2018), a view crystallized in al-Ghazālī, for whom death marks a simple alteration of state rather than the extinction of the spirit (Al-Ghazālī, 1995, p. 126; al-Qurtubī, 2019, pp. 13, 199).

This ontological continuity between death and life also finds concrete expression in pre-modern social practices. Death, in many pre-modern orders, was bound up in ongoing processes of symbolic exchange rather than withdrawn from the circulation of life, understood as a form of being whose status shifted within social circulation. This is clearly visible in practices such as burying the dead within the home rather than removing them from the domain of the living, and carrying on everyday life over these spaces, an arrangement turning the house into a shared zone of continuity between the living and the dead (Hodder, 2006, pp. 84–102). Similarly, certain body parts of the dead, such as the skull, were reworked and kept in circulation within the settlement, repositioning death within a different status inside networks of social relations (Kuijt, 2008, pp. 171–197). The gradual redefinition of an individual's status after death shows that this passage was regulated through collective rituals, without interrupting social continuity (Hertz, 2004, pp. 29–76). This continuity thus situates the meaning of death within an ontological perspective independent of political regulation, where life constitutes itself as a domain capable of determining its own direction and value without becoming an object of external intervention. It does not produce a full convergence between life's politically governable dimensions and the meaning of death, but maintains a lasting distance between how life is regulated and the function of death, shielding death's position within existence from the direct reach of political power.

Under what conditions does a paradigmatic rupture emerge, one that dissolves this continuity between death and life and reconstitutes it on a different ontological plane? And through what rationalities does this rupture redefine the political in its relation to death? Answering this requires thinking through how death evolved from a reference guiding existence, whether transcendentally or immanently, into a principle determining life and its conditions from the outside, a displacement that transforms the very conditions under which life can be constituted and lays bare the rationalities through which the political redraws its own foundations in relation to death. This article traces these rationalities across three thresholds, each internally bound up with the others: i) *The Hobbesian threshold: fear and violence*, condensed into the logic of reciprocal killability, place death at the very center of the sovereign decision. What emerges is a rationality

that constitutes the political precisely by seizing death and folding it into a regulatory technique aimed at safeguarding life, an extraordinary prerogative that decides under what circumstances, to what degree, and on what grounds the line between preserving life and exposing it to death is drawn. ii) *The biopolitical threshold*: sovereignty's monopoly over the power to decide gives way to something more diffuse, as power reaches into the biological processes of the population, multiplying the technologies through which life is *produced, circulated, and sustained*. Death is stripped of its status as a singular event and recast as a calibrating function distributed across the fabric of life's processes, opening onto a logic of intervention operating through the population's own internal dynamics, in which degrees of survival become calculable and death is reconstituted as a variable immanent to their distribution. Yet the biopolitical threshold is no single model, but a layered constellation of perspectives, each emerging from within the others. iii) *The neo-Hobbesian biopolitical threshold*: rather than abandoning the logic of the biopolitical threshold, this threshold extends it into a new regulatory surface that predetermines how life diffuses along different lines and concentrates at particular points, a rationality of modulation in which death functions as a force that redirects diffusion and sharpens points of concentration. Governing life, within this regime, takes the form of a logic organized through the redirection of flows, the calibration of intensities, and the constant reconstitution of thresholds of intervention. Taken together, these three thresholds let us trace a single transformation in the relationship between death and life, from the centralized rupture the sovereign decision inflicts on life, through the biological processes of the population, into a regulatory logic in which life diffuses across varying intensities and concentrates at specific thresholds.

This article does not claim that the technologies of power unfold according to a linear history, whether historically or even in a strictly logical sense. Instead, following Bauman's suggestion that death be traced within the constitutive logic of social institutions (Bauman, 1992, pp. 9–11), it adopts an archaeology of power as an analytical framework, one rendering visible the historical conditions under which death exists under different political rationalities. The three thresholds this article proposes serve as analytical devices, each bringing into view a different configuration of the relationship between death and life; Hobbesian sovereignty and biopolitical governmentality are treated not as static models but as rationalities of power rearticulable at varying intensities. The shift from Hobbes's confiscatory logic to a biopolitical regime of production may look, at first glance, like nothing less than a refinement of power. But this appearance is deceptive: as the concluding sections will show, contemporary necropolitical practices betray this process for what it is, a reversion to sovereignty's concrete, naked, and raw violence. Biopolitics, in this way, can circle back to where it began, to the absolute mastery of death. The same logic that lets it protect and optimize life can just as easily turn against life, an immunitary reflex that ends up attacking the very thing it was built to defend.

1. The Hobbesian Threshold: Governing Life through Death

It is with Hobbes that the continuity binding life and death comes undone, giving way to a political rationality grounded in reciprocal killability. Hobbes displaces the ontological framework in which death had been a threshold immanent to being, rejecting pre-modern mystical, metaphysical, and theological accounts of death in favor of a mechanistic, materialist anthropology. The human being becomes an isolated unit, much like a colliding atom: severed from transcendent purpose, driven by the will to survive, private desire, and rational calculation. This ontology rests on insecurity, the fear that

arises when everyone is equally free to protect themselves and kill others. Life survives only by contract, trading the freedom to kill for security. Through this exchange, life, death, and freedom are conscripted into the ontological object of the political. Under this contract, death no longer opens onto life's continuity as a threshold, but stands opposite it, a constant and menacing threat, breeding a constitutive tension that grips the subject's every effort to persist in being. Hobbes's thought takes shape exactly where this tension acquires political form, transforming the basic logic governing the relationship between death and life. Death no longer discloses the meaning of existence as a threshold or reference point; it hardens into a rigid, impermeable boundary that sovereignty must seize and neutralize at the center. This Hobbesian rupture, the first moment in which death's ontological status is subordinated to political rationality, severs the founding of political order from the *telos* of the "good life" altogether. What remains is the compulsory ordering of atomized beings, each seeking security against death, an ontological reconstitution as much as a political one. To grasp this transformation, one must first reckon with its necessary ground, the condition of permanent war. One of the key passages showing how Hobbes constructs this ground reads as follows:

"For War consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known; and therefore the notion of *time* is to be considered in the nature of war, as it is in the nature of weather. For as the nature of foul weather lieth not in a shower or two of rain, but in an inclination thereto of many days together, so the nature of war consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary" (Hobbes, 1994, p. 76).

In this passage, Hobbes reconfigures the relationship between *death* and *time* through his conception of *war*. For Hobbes, war is not reducible to the practical *moment* of physical combat; it appears instead as a form of *time* in which reciprocal distrust acquires duration and permanence, designating an order of existence where conflicting wills sustain and renew each other across time. War, put differently, is not a singular *moment* of violence. Peace has lost every institutional and ontological guarantee, and death and violence circulate endlessly, like weather, a comparison that is not incidental: violence and death, for Hobbes, are never isolated events but a standing field of tendency, an atmosphere always pressing toward eruption, defined not by an isolated shower but by a sustained charge toward storm. War is governed by an identical logic. What sustains it is the existential will driving toward violence and the utter absence of any counter-assurance against it, stretching violence, death, and the fear of death across the whole of time. War in the state of nature is thus no longer a historical *event*; it hardens into a *climate*, holding the potential for storm within every moment and governing atomized, rational subjects from the inside out. It may erupt at any moment, generating death through the sheer possibility of violence alone, a constellation of tendencies driving a condition of tension and fear in which every guarantee securing life has vanished. This structure exposes an ontological ground where death is, for the first time, *systematically* and *constantly* constituted as a threat:

"Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. (...) and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1994, p.76).

This fragmentary portrait of the state of nature reveals a plane of existence in which death is experienced as an ever-present possibility of violence, a constant threat emerging

directly from the very structure of relations among individuals. The fear of death solidifies into a structural condition, produced through reciprocity itself, drawing its force from a single fact: everyone, without exception, can become the source of another's death. This fear, then, only takes hold within a relational structure where killability is shared equally among all. As Hannah Arendt emphasizes, it is not the capacity to kill as such that proves decisive, but the equal distribution of the fear that arises when everyone possesses that capacity alike (Arendt, 1969, p. 68). Taken together, Hobbes's portrait of the state of nature and Arendt's emphasis on equal fear reveal the relational plane on which the logic of the political comes to be constituted, where death sets the outer limit for the destructive forces individuals direct at one another. Centralizing this threat under a single authority is what makes political order possible, reshaping death's ontological status, since for Hobbes the fear of death cannot be eliminated so long as human beings remain in the state of nature (Hobbes, 1994, p. 76). This reciprocity and permanence explain why the contract cannot remain a mere act of legal consent, but instead reorganizes life and death within sovereign decision itself, through what amounts to an ontological transfer.

"The only way to erect such a common power as may be able to defend them from the invasion of foreigners and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort as that by their own industry, and by the fruits of the earth, they may nourish themselves and live contentedly, is to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will, which is as much as to say, to appoint one man or assembly of men to bear their person, and every one to own and acknowledge himself to be author of whatsoever he that so beareth their person shall act, or cause to be acted, in those things which concern the common peace and safety, and therein to submit their wills, ever yone to his will, and their judgments, to his judgment. This is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all, in one and the same person, made by covenant of every man with every man, in such manner as if every man should say to every man *I authorise and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner.* This done, the multitude so united in one person is called a COMMONWEALTH, in Latin CIVITAS. This is the generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that *Mortal God* to which we owe, under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence." (Hobbes, 1994, s. 109).

This passage stands as a dense compression of the Leviathan's founding logic, opening onto a perspective that lets us read Hobbesian sovereignty through Schmitt's conceptual line in *Political Theology*. Schmitt's importance lies in the line of thought he builds, reading Hobbes within his own radical threshold while reasoning, in a genuinely Hobbesian register, to place his logic of sovereignty at the very core of the modern political form. Read through Schmitt, this passage performs a genuine paradox: it stages, in a single gesture, both a rupture severing modern sovereignty from its mystical, metaphysical, and theological roots, and a transfer that smuggles those same roots back into a secular political mechanism. Schmitt's own claim, that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (Schmitt, 2005, p. 36), licenses precisely this reading of sovereignty as a movement of transfer. The conceptual weight of this passage comes to a head at a single point, the moment Leviathan is named a "mortal god," designating something far more radical than a technical apparatus of government: the very incarnation of transcendent divine power within the sovereign's earthly body. Sovereignty, on this reading, begins as a political order built

by common will, yet ends in a power that outstrips its own limits, becoming an artificial god brought into being by a will that penetrates it through the contract as though it were a *soul*. This common will, reproducing the earthly effect of divine power within the political body, carries God's power and absoluteness directly into the body of sovereignty, even as it maintains critical distance from the very idea of a transcendent God (Hobbes, 1994, 3, 109). The resulting structure is paradoxical: sovereignty is grounded in the individual's own will, the very will that consents to surrender its rights, yet from the moment of its creation generates an unquestionable divine authority that erases that same will. *Creation* and *submission* are not two separate acts but one and the same gesture, concentrating the qualities of transcendent might within Hobbes's "Mortal God," a sovereign power now lodged in a political body (Brown, 2010, p. 60). For Schmitt, this specificity reaches its highest intensity in a single, famous definition, "sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt, 2005, p. 5). The transcendent God's power to work miracles becomes the power of the sovereign, a god brought down to earth, who now produces the exception, suspends the law, and exercises the right to kill as an act of *decision*. On precisely this point, Hobbes and Schmitt converge, that sovereign power posits and enforces every legal norm, yet rests on nothing more than the power to decide (Schmitt, 2007, p. 66).

This radical rupture in the conception of God transforms the modes of being of the concepts built around it, redefining their ontological status, and death sits at the center of this transformation. With this Hobbesian conception, the relationship between politics and the classical metaphysical, mystical, and theological understandings of death is transformed at its root: the sovereign's decisional authority, as a mortal god brought down to earth, now directly determines death's ontological status. This transformation corresponds to a two-stage reconstitution of death within political rationality. In the first stage, the fear of death in the state of nature is withdrawn from its form as a chaotic tension keeping individuals mutually on guard, becoming instead the organizing principle of the reciprocal relation between the sovereign's protection and the subject's obedience, captured in Schmitt's own formula, *protego ergo oblige* (I protect, therefore I oblige) (Schmitt, 2007, p. 52; Brown, 2010, p. 60). In the second stage, death rooted in conceptions of a transcendent God becomes a practice that interrupts life's ontological continuity through the sovereign's power to decide. Earlier frameworks had cast death as a passage, a threshold marking continuity; in the Hobbesian framework it is transfigured into an event, ruptured at will by sovereign decision. Death has become, fully and without remainder, a political event, bound absolutely to a single political decision.

The figure of the mortal god, accordingly, concentrates the exercise of power within two simultaneous regimes: a regime of exchange and a regime of translation. The first builds its bond between *protection* and *obedience* through the fear of death, making the continuation of life conditional on obedience directed at the sovereign and reconstituting life as a relation of dependency that the sovereign decision either sustains or interrupts. The second converts *miracle* into *exception*, exception into *decision*, and decision into the mode of the *event*, establishing the order that determines under what conditions this continuity will be interrupted. Together, these regimes generate a temporality without a fixed moment of interruption; interruption remains possible at every instant. Time itself becomes a kind of meteorological charge, permanently suspended, always on the verge of breaking. Within this charge, the *event* appears at a threshold of *power-event*, opened and closed at the sovereign's own choosing: *power* settles into the operation that regulates the conditions of the event's occurrence, while *decision* emerges as an intensity of intervention, working either to interrupt those

conditions or to sustain them. The division between life and death takes shape at this threshold of *power-event*, as a distribution parceled out across time, and life becomes the surface on which this distribution is applied, the very domain in which sovereignty exercises itself. Sovereignty's disposition over life thus becomes visible as the capacity to determine the conditions of death and suspend them at will, converting itself into a right to kill exercised through the capacity to activate or suspend the power of killing. Sovereign decision, at this point, concentrates into a right that determines the boundary between sustaining life and interrupting it, a concentration Michel Foucault's own formulation of sovereignty, the right "to take life or let live," renders even more visible at the political level.

"The sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring. The right which was formulated as the 'power of life and death' was in reality the right to take life or let live. Its symbol, after all, was the sword. Perhaps this juridical form must be referred to a historical type of society in which power was exercised mainly as a means of deduction (*prélèvement*), a subtraction mechanism, a right to appropriate a portion of the wealth, a tax of products, goods and services, labor and blood, levied on the subjects. Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it" (Foucault, 1978, p. 136).

Foucault's chosen symbol for this juridical form, the sword, marks the point where the "meteorological charge" generated by the regimes of exchange and translation turns radical, as sovereignty registers its own legitimacy in a logic of ontological seizure. Sovereignty installs itself over life as a constitutive "right of seizure," sustaining the continuity of existence precisely by keeping the power to kill sheathed. This operation, what Foucault diagnoses as the "subtraction mechanism," exposes how the Hobbesian sovereign has become a vertical position of seizure, draining life of its blood and breath. The sovereign's sword exceeds the limits of any single *event*, defining every moment of life through the sovereign's "withheld violence," his "withheld right to kill." The "subtraction mechanism" is, in fact, an effort to sever life's ontological continuity altogether, stripping away every transcendent principle and reference, every meaning, threshold, momentum, and accumulation, until what remains is nothing more than *vitality*, mere matter, mere mass. The sovereign's right to *take life* or *let live* is, accordingly, an absolute form of disposition, encircling life as a consumable *mass* and coding it as a static block ready to be shattered at any moment (Foucault, 2003, pp. 240-241). The Hobbesian sovereign, as Foucault reformulates it, is a figure who descends with the sword upon life's natural and meaningful workings, appropriating it through "subtraction," "seizure," and "suppression" able to grasp life only by *interruption*, only by killing it. Or, in Foucault's own words, the sovereign evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring. This form of power, which Foucault formulates as the *right to take life or let live*, we call *governing life through death*. Death, within this order, is a singular point of intensity and event, drawing the boundary of life and sharpening its outline.

2. The Biopolitical Threshold: Governing Death through Life

The Hobbesian rupture did more than sever the continuity that pre-modern political ontologies had built between life and death on mystical, metaphysical, and theological grounds. It also, significantly, sowed the seeds of biopower, a biopolitical

cycle that would ground the governability of death itself in political rationality. Foucault gives this process a precise name, the biopolitical rupture, the point at which these seeds take root and grow active within the political field from the eighteenth century onward. The biopolitical rupture designates a threshold at which the political turns its orientation toward life itself. A whole apparatus, government, protection, regulation, limitation, suspension, descends upon life, sorting it, ranking it, disqualifying whatever fails to measure up, and redirecting the rest. This section, then, turns to Foucault to trace how the Hobbesian logic of death thins out and settles into the very tissue of life within the biopolitical field, asking, in turn, what conditions come to govern life's continuation and what forms of intervention produce those very conditions.

At first sight, this threshold looks like a genuine departure from the death-centered logic anchoring Hobbesian sovereignty to its threshold of power, decision, and event. That impression, though, does not survive closer scrutiny: biopolitical measuring, monitoring, and directing of life, however surgical its precision, does not amount to an ontological liquidation of that logic, but dissolves the structure that once concentrated it within a single moment, distributing it instead across the entire span of life's processes. Biopolitical power sustains the Hobbesian logic of power, sometimes even foregrounding it as a visible technique, but its energies concentrate on the strategies through which that raw, concrete, naked logic comes to be thinned out and dispersed. We may call this the threshold of the distribution of power, decision, and event: these no longer converge in one decisive instant but ripple across life's many layers, opening and closing at each, taking on a distinct intensity with each resurfacing. Far from excluding one another, biopolitical and Hobbesian logic lean on each other, grow out of each other, and coexist as distinct thresholds within one and the same political rationality, a genealogical line stretching wide enough, logically and structurally, to reach back and absorb the mechanisms of power that came before Hobbes (Lemke, 2011, p. 53, 56). Foucault charts this biopolitical terrain with unmatched rigor, and it is precisely this achievement that places him at the center of how we understand the structural transformation of sovereignty's technologies. His real significance lies in his diagnosis of the thresholds of continuity and rupture marking the passage from this juridico-discursive regime to biopolitical governmentality: his analysis of Hobbesian sovereignty's death-centered dispositions runs parallel to his account of biopower's emergence as a new technology of power, together tracing a single, unbroken trajectory in the evolution of power. This transformation can also be read as the singular form of concentration held by the threshold of power, decision, and event, thinning out and spreading across life's different layers. One passage lays bare how that absolute status of death, concentrated in singular events at this threshold and represented by the sword of Hobbesian sovereignty, infiltrates the capillaries of life and turns into a governmental distribution, a diluted apparatus of power:

"Since the classical age the West has undergone a very profound transformation of these mechanisms of power. 'Deduction' (prélèvement) has tended to be no longer the major form of power but merely one element among others, working to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them. There has been a parallel shift in the right of death, or at least a tendency to align itself with the exigencies of a life-administering power and to define itself accordingly. This death that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life" (Foucault, 1978, p. 136).

This radical transformation unfolds as a complex threshold, power sheathing its *sword* and grafting itself directly onto life itself: a biopolitical mutation replacing the sovereign's *right to kill* with a *duty to foster life* in the name of the social body's health. This new form of power emerges through the coordinated deployment of techniques that incite, strengthen, and regulate forces, redirecting the relationship away from singular concentration and toward the many-layered dynamics of life, forging its relationship to life and death through techniques grafted onto the very workings of force. These techniques leave neither life nor death as an immutable given, constructing both instead as a field of processes endlessly set in motion, redirected, and paced. Death, in this sense, is no longer a ceremony the sovereign performs upon his victim, but a systematic orientation calibrated to the demands of the power that governs life. This conceptual line moves from disposition to regulation, from rupture to continuity, from concentration to diffusion, radically redefining the direction of power's relationship to life, within which life appears as a field of processes, multiplied, redirected, redistributed, worked upon at varying intensities. The withdrawal of the "right of disposition" from its Hobbesian, central position must not be mistaken for the disappearance of power's capacity to interrupt life through death; what changes is not the capacity itself but the mechanics of its operation. Power now grounds itself in a rational necessity, an operational threshold whose task is to optimize life's processes and secure their biological continuity, becoming a whole ensemble of processes, accelerating, limiting, and redistributing flows, rescaling its structure of governing life through death and steering it toward particular directions.

"And I think that one of the greatest transformations political right underwent in the nineteenth century was precisely that, I wouldn't say exactly that sovereignty's old right—to take life or let live—was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. It is the power to 'make' live and 'let' die. The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die" (Foucault, 2003, p. 241).

The transformation that comes into focus in Foucault's analysis of power is best grasped as a movement of interweaving, articulation, and displacement. The emphasis on "completion" signals a precise fact: Hobbesian sovereignty's "right to kill" has not vanished but been rearranged within a new logic, infiltrating the very techniques that govern life's processes and acquiring, in the process, a new function. The tension between "make live" and "let die" shows the same shift, from a force that interrupts life through death to a logic that regulates its continuity. "Let die", in this sense, marks the most critical threshold of this new biopolitical logic, emerging wherever interruptive intervention withdraws, in zones regulatory techniques cannot, or will not, reach. The sovereign's right to kill persists in this form too, infiltrating biopolitical logic and building the relation between death and life through interwoven processes. Even when left unexercised, the capacity to kill still decides, functioning as a "completion" that marks which areas of life receive support and which fall outside regulation. "Make live" and "let die" thus form a single internal tension, worked at varying intensities, exposing power's subtlest, deepest operation. This biopolitical form of power, which Foucault formulates as "make live and let die", we call *governing death through life*. This form of power also shifts death's position: rather than a singular act, death becomes an effect circulating within the mechanisms that determine life's sustainability. In the Hobbesian rupture, death displayed the sovereign's absolute power; in biopolitical logic, power

becomes a set of techniques encircling the body, lodging death within life, governing it from inside, and thereby *making it live*, that is, *manufacturing* life through death. To manufacture life, we must insist, is power's most advanced, most extreme, and most comprehensive form.

How power's techniques, embedded in life's different layers, transform life itself into *manufacture* and *production* becomes clearer across the conceptual lines linking Foucault's works. In *Discipline and Punish*, disciplinary power targeting the body reveals techniques fragmenting time, rendering movement measurable, and shaping behavior through repetition, visible in the body's movements broken down, time ordered into minute schedules, behavior rebuilt through constant drill (Foucault, 1977, pp. 148, 157), regulation operating at the micro level. Foucault treats the body as an object of "anatomo-politics", a concept developed in *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). In *Security, Territory, Population*, he extends this to a broader field grasping the *population*, discovered as a biopolitical mass, through its own internal dynamics, governed by a logic of calculation that reorganizes the distribution of processes such as birth rates, disease curves, circulation patterns, and risk distributions (Foucault, 2007, 1, 35, 82, 89-91). In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, these regulations of *life as population* gain a different intensity, reexamined around which rationality governs them: Foucault's analysis of liberal and neoliberal governmental reason shows power building a framework that activates life's own internal dynamics, bends them toward particular directions, and constantly recalibrates these tendencies. Mechanisms such as the market, competition, and entrepreneurship thus exceed their status as economic categories, becoming carriers of a logic that shapes life's consumption, production, socio-political, and biological dimensions simultaneously, a *homo economicus* retheorized and reorganized according to a new rationality (Foucault, 2008, p. 267-271). Taken together, these conceptual lines reveal a radical shift in the object, site, timing, rhythm, and scope of biopolitical power. Where Hobbesian power sought to discipline the body into a *mold*, the new biopower sets *normalization* in motion: regulations, health standards and insurance, forms of desire, the capacity to work, consume, and produce, construct how life ought to be, and life becomes a *product* of power. Power constructs life itself, its desires, its socio-political and biological processes, pushing it to the furthest edge of governability. Power, at this point, is no longer only a relation of submission, obedience, and government, but also a *relation of production* (Foucault, 1977, pp. 135-141; 2007, pp. 97-98]. What, then, is this *production*, and on what terms should it be understood?

It is through three operations, each tracking a layer of power's functioning, that production takes shape across life's different planes: life constituted, shaped, and directed through specific techniques of power, the systematic construction of the conditions determining how life exists, functions, and is sustained, a regulatory logic immanent to life's own functioning that power itself has become. i) At the disciplinary level, production works the body through set movements, time regulations, and repeated behaviors, turning it into an obedient, useful capacity, reorganizing its potential according to a scheme of efficiency and rendering it usable (Foucault, 1977, p. 135-141). ii) *Production calibrated at the level of population*: it treats life through probability distributions, such as birth rates, disease curves, and mortality statistics, rendering the tendencies that determine its continuity calculable and reorganizable, life processed as statistical variation distributed along particular directions (Foucault, 2007, pp. 88-90). iii) At the level of governmental rationality, production emerges as a calibrating relation letting life operate within set parameters through its own internal dynamics. Without forcing life from outside, mechanisms such as the market, competition, and

entrepreneurship build an environment shaping individuals' behaviors, preferences, and orientations within set frameworks, constructing the conditions that sustain life within set normative and technical limits (Foucault, 2008, p. 67-68; Wolfe, 2018, pp. 82–101). Just as “let die” names a new form of power, we might call this “let produce”, leaving the environment, population included, to *production* or “let produce” (Foucault, 2003, p. 29-32). Life, at this level, is constituted as a process reproducing its own functioning through specific incentives, limits, and orientations.

Taken together, these three levels show production doing three things simultaneously, building conditions across different levels, constantly recalibrating them, and sustaining life by leaving it to production at varying intensities. Foucault's grasp of power as a relation of production corresponds to power's own logic, one that builds life's conditions of *efficiency* and constantly recalibrates them: power must be understood as an order of production that raises life's limits of *efficiency*, working life within set thresholds, intensities, and orientations, and through that very operation ceaselessly reconstituting it. Power's productive rationality cannot be reduced to techniques distributing life as a field of processes across the *body*, *population*, and *governmentality*; it also opens onto a deeper register of modulation, determining the direction these processes diffuse, the thresholds where they concentrate, which lines of life gain strength, and which recede. Foucault's own analyses confirm this: his work on security mechanisms, statistical regulations through risk and population, and “make live and let die” all show life governed as a field of processes, worked and calibrated across varying intensities. Yet this field leaves a theoretical remainder: how the diffusion of death and its concentration at particular points are built into productive calibrations, a problem that requires us to grasp how death, alongside production, is constituted through lines of diffusion and thresholds of concentration.

3. The Neo-Hobbesian Biopolitical Threshold: Reconstituting Life and Death

Power's relation of production to life exceeds the mere working of processes, also demanding a logic of calibration that determines their direction of diffusion and thresholds of concentration. Life, at this threshold, moves along two paths at once, sustaining its realized forms while splitting into diverging lines, each following its own course, functioning as a whole of processes moving through different orientations and breaking points. Power's intervention, accordingly, expands through forms that redirect these processes, accelerating some and limiting others. This modulation joins techniques tied to security, risk, and population calculations (Foucault, 1978; Ewald, 1991) that determine how different segments of life are to be worked (Lemke, 2011, pp. 34-40; Rose, 2001, pp. 1–30). Within this same regulatory logic, life is continuously reshaped without remainder (Gökdağ, 2021a, p. 217; Gökdağ, 2021b, pp. 325–330), a reconstitution carrying differentiating interventions that boost some processes' sustainability while pushing others toward withdrawal. Death, thus, positions itself as an effect arising within these differentiations, sharpening their direction. Power, through relations of production, distributes life across the layers of body, population, and governmentality, and death must be grasped within this same movement, circulating alongside power's intervention and shaping the internal differentiation of these processes. Tracing death, then, means following the lines along which selection and differentiation take shape, within the very layers where power and production work together, for life's production establishes an order of differentiation, building continuities across life's layers while determining where they concentrate and where they withdraw. Within this order, death becomes visible as a variable, passing through the degrees of intervention

spread across these layers and determining them in turn.

At the level of the body, death works through a threshold logic built on the detailed organization of movement, the slicing of time, and the measurement of performance. Exercise, surveillance, and correction hold the body to a precise standard of output; fatigue, exhaustion, and fragility signal any deviation from it, each summoning its own precise degree of intervention, producing a process effect along curves of wear, risk, and delayed intervention that recalibrates the body against precise performance thresholds. At the level of the population, death circulates as a parameter within birth rates, disease curves, and mortality distributions: epidemiological charts, risk maps, and demographic projections determine at what pace life continues across which segments, while death rates calibrate these very regulations. Vaccine timing, targeted screening, and regional resource allocation likewise calibrate life's overall rhythm along statistical trends, death functioning like a coefficient that sets that calibration's direction and limits. At the level of governmental rationality, death settles into incentive mechanisms built on market, competition, and risk, forming a field of regulation that directs behavior and steers flows toward set directions. Insurance premiums differentiated by risk, credit and access tied to risk profiles, life itself reckoned in costs and returns, these push certain forms of existence forward while pushing others systematically back, death working as a regulatory effect that guides preferences, shapes behavior, and draws resource flows toward set points of concentration. Death's operation across these three levels exposes an order of distribution that predetermines the forms life's continuation can take. Power, in the end, is nothing less than a rationality of diffusion and concentration, deciding in advance which directions life's flow may take.

Deleuze's analysis of control societies opens a line that exposes exactly how this multilayered order of intervention operates. His concept of "modulation" shows disciplinary mechanisms of enclosure and molding giving way to a new mechanism, one recalibrating flows without ever stopping them, grading access, coding passage, and treating the subject as a variable unit of processing. The individual, within this logic, becomes a node in circulation, continuously updated through credit score, health profile, digital trace, behavioral cluster, and access privileges. This shift also reveals how the forms of intervention marked at earlier levels converge, no longer bound to single domains, within a logic of calibration that gains continuity. Life, from this point on, is grasped as a field of operations, calibrated, accelerated, slowed, suspended, and set back into circulation without interruption. Deleuze's logic of code, password, and access takes concrete form in insurance calculations, platform classification, and institutional risk management, treating life as flows continuously reorganized. This logic of modulation relates to death by positioning it as a redirecting effect within the flow of life (Deleuze, 1992, pp. 3–7; Patton, 2018, pp. 196–197). Insurance systems, differentiating premiums by risk calculations drawn from stored personal data, work as a mechanism continuously recalibrating which lines of life concentrate and which weaken. This calculating logic does two things at once: it reconstitutes life as lines distributed across data sets, and folds death into that very distribution, an inseparable part of it. Death's very visibility, as a result, gets redistributed, withdrawn from some areas and concentrated in others. The problem, at exactly this point, shifts from how flows are directed to where that direction produces accumulation and congestion, leading to a different problem altogether, namely the political forms of concentration. The regime of diffusion and concentration, accordingly, places death within this calculating logic through specialized medical-technical interventions, hospitals and intensive care units, as a matter endlessly postponed, delayed, overlooked, or concealed (Gökdağ & Karadeniz, 2021, pp. 283–

289).

Baudrillard pushes this discussion further, tracing death's withdrawal from symbolic circulation to the very annihilation of its meaning. Modern apparatuses, for Baudrillard, suspend death's function of symbolic exchange, withdrawing it from circulation and rendering it an element the code can reprocess. This displacement exceeds hospitals and hospices, stripping death of its symbolic, reversible obligation and binding it to a one-way flow (Baudrillard, 2017, pp. 146-151) that lets death be reproduced within the order of signs, no longer directly experienced, entering the code as a value, postponed, recorded, endlessly recirculated (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 1-7). Death's meaning dissolves into signs, losing its referent, reproduced instead within a universe of simulation (Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 121-123). Stripped of symbolic obligation, death is drawn irreversibly into the system, and life's circulation, losing the reciprocity that once could interrupt it, expands even as this expansion erodes its inner limits. As Baudrillard's political economy of the sign reveals, a code regime that endlessly reproduces difference determines value, and death becomes one of that regime's most extreme mechanisms of differentiation (Baudrillard, 2019, pp. 58-62). Yet death's withdrawal is paradoxically simultaneous with its return, now concentrated in another register: death fades from life's flow with one hand and multiplies into overwhelming visibility with the other, buried in clinical silence on one side, consumed to excess on the other, a simulated object on screens, in the news, in scenes of geopolitical violence. This tension, between death's disappearance and its excess, does not stay contained within the simulation of "the real" and "the hyperreal"; it shatters the real itself. Death, in the wake of that shattering, must be rethought within a thanato-political and necropolitical regime, one that accumulates at specific points. To simulate death's exclusion from the system, we insist, is at once to expose the system's own capacity, at any moment, to expel any population it chooses through regimes of death.

Life, within this code-regulated circulation, is continuously recalibrated by modes of production working across body, population, and governmentality, at varying intensities, this structure reaching its own limit at threshold zones where legal determination is suspended and that very suspension forges a new bond. These zones appear as points where interventions, dispersed through modulation and simulation, converge and compress, shedding legal form to touch life directly as death. Agamben's regime of exception matters for a precise reason: it reveals a threshold where law suspends itself to touch life directly, made visible when intervention across these multiple levels withdraws at certain moments and accumulates at others, a zone where the distinction between the law's validity and its suspension operates simultaneously (Agamben, 2005, pp. 3-5, 23-25). Law's withdrawal, alongside the sharpening of sovereign decision, opens a zone of concentration where intervention turns direct, producing a border logic that operates both inside and outside the legal field (Karadeniz, 2018, p. 93), the product of a mechanism of differentiation between exclusion and inclusion. The political field, at this point, opens only through the relation a living being, as mere zoe, holds to its own life, an opening that produces a structure admitting and excluding at once as production works life at varying intensities across its layers. The figures of zoe, or bare life, must thus be understood as a moment of concentration, one where life's production, at certain thresholds, suspends itself between protection and abandonment (Gökdağ, 2022, p. 14), positioned between killability and unsacrificeability in a way that renders sovereignty's limits visible (Agamben, 1998, pp. 63-67). Sovereign decision, accordingly, produces a "zone of indistinction" where bios and zoe, inside and outside, remain unresolved yet held together (Agamben, 1998, pp. 84-86), a threshold

order determining at which layers life's production concentrates and at which it withdraws.

Legal suspension opens a “zone of indistinction.” But that zone does not float free: it crashes into the sharpest edges of racial, geopolitical, and spatial division, and from that crash a new threshold is born, one where *indeterminacy* and *certainly* forge each other in the same breath. This simultaneity is itself an order, intervention striking directly, fused with legal indeterminacy; as the norm withdraws and decision moves in, the very ground it occupies fractures, splintering into zones of unequal intensity. This top-down structure of modern biopolitical sovereignty turns the shattered layers of territory into zones of siege, building necro-technological terrains where life itself is suspended within a regime of technical impossibility. Production, within this order, moves unevenly, thickening along certain lines, thinning along others, bending under the very limits circulation imposes, and never settling into the inner logic of access regimes (Gökdağ & Karadeniz, 2020, pp. 1067–1072). Consider the migrant, hurled to the outer edge of institutional life, marked at any moment for sacrifice by a sovereign decision on exception. This is no accident, but the very logic of spatial distribution laid bare: positioned as the other at the very edge of the socio-political order, the migrant is pushed outside production and kept alive only in permanent exilic alert, a necropolitical regime of indeterminacy rendered concrete in history and practice (Çiçek & Karadeniz, 2024, p. 29). This movement strips away any measure, leaving continuity and rupture, indeterminacy and certainty, no longer at a calculable distance from one another. Power positions space, population, race, and geopolitics, layering vulnerability and scattering exposure on one side, concentrating protection in select categories on the other (Mbembe, 2019, pp. 66-68), a stratification building “death-worlds” that reduce vast racial and geopolitical populations to the “living dead” (Mbembe, 2001, pp. 90-92), objects stripped of any right to be made to live or let live at all, marking a threshold of death in its most radical form. War, occupation, border, and blockade stand as this order's clearest expressions, divisions that are the immanent outcome of legal indeterminacy operating in lockstep with spatial certainty. In these spaces, which either narrow life's intervals or erase them outright, death emerges as a threshold where indeterminacy meets certainty, care withdraws entirely, and intensity accumulates. Life's production and death's distribution, accordingly, work as one structure producing varying degrees of intensity, a necropolitical technology leaving life in a state of constant, concrete agony. The regimes of diffusion and concentration, joined within a single political apparatus, mark a new threshold of modern biopolitical rationality, where death takes on a function, joining regulatory techniques spread across life's layers with sovereign interventions concentrated in particular spaces, within one and the same political logic.

This threshold, where regimes of diffusion and concentration intersect, exposes the ontological ground on which the neo-Hobbesian biopolitical rationality becomes visible. Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe converge on a single point: a radical “necropolitical” leap, the Hobbesian “state of nature” restored to the center of law and politics, indeterminacy itself wielded as a technology of absolute certainty. This threshold represents an ontological shift. “Order” no longer derives from “chaos”; chaos itself is simulated, at a steady frequency. At this threshold, power's rationality of healing, civilizing, optimizing, improving life, in short, its very capacity to “produce life”, is seized and re-objectified by a rationality that produces death instead. The ancient Hobbesian terror, concrete and raw, the very horror biopolitical rationality was supposed to have thinned out and dispersed, concentrates once more, hardening back into solid form. The Hobbesian state of nature, then, refuses to stay in the past. It returns, reshaped

into a form of government at work in contemporary security, borders, camps, and siege. Palestine offers a clear example, Agamben's "camp", the absolute space of exception, fusing there with Mbembe's "death-worlds". The constant possibility of death for those who live there becomes power's most unshakeable certainty, exposing a neo-Hobbesian rationality that founds sovereignty, once again, on the right to "kill and let live". Death, in these worlds, is no mere event. It is a signature, power inscribing its spatial sovereignty into the earth, day by day.

Conclusion

This study has traced death's transformation within modern political rationalities, a theoretical conclusion shifting the discussion's center to life's ontological constitution: every shift in death's political function simultaneously redefines life's ontological status. Life, thus, is no longer a given domain awaiting intervention, but a historical ontological form constituted through death's functions under differing rationalities of power. The question modern political thought must revisit, then, is not how power governs life, but under what ontological conditions life becomes governable at all, a question demanding a rereading that places modern political thought's conceptual architecture within a different relational field. Sovereignty, security, right, population, exception, governmentality, these concepts gain meaning not only through their own histories but within a shared ontological network constituting life, a network allowing modern power's conceptual organization to be assessed within a broader perspective and attention to turn to the ontological plane these concepts jointly produce. This is precisely where modern political thought's theoretical opening emerges: when this conceptual architecture becomes readable through the relations different rationalities of power form with one another, life's political constitution gains new research paths within the resulting whole. Life, in the end, is a knot where concepts bind together, the point at which their ontological relations become visible.

This approach also allows for repositioning theoretical frameworks developed within modern political thought, as conceptualizations exposing different dimensions of the same historical experience can be reconnected around a shared ontological problem. This allows us to assess modern power theory's explanatory models as a relational field of thought, exposing different appearances of the same ontological transformation, and the relations this article has traced between political thought's theoretical lines enable new conceptual wholes exceeding any single theory's explanatory capacity. This necropolitical apparatus pulls death from its diffuse seepage into life, handing it back to biopower as its sharpest instrument, imposing violence as ontological law; yet it is nothing other than the raw Hobbesian core, thinned at biopower's origin, hardening again. The layers of power this article lays out do not form a sequence of stages that follow and abandon one another, but must be read as links in a single, interlocking spiral. Biopolitics, at its limit, drives its will to maximize life until exception becomes rule, and every mechanism built to make live hurls people back to the threshold of absolute death, back to that state of nature.

Death, across this entire analysis, acquires a distinct theoretical position. As one of political thought's defining limits, death produces an analytic clarity, exposing the ontological relations within which life takes form. Life's different modes of existence, forms of continuity, and degrees of vulnerability become readable through death's political functions. For power's deepest effect lies in this immanent organization, binding life's zones of protection to death's zones of circulation, not as two isolated regimes, but

as diverging lines of a single political fabric. Life, in this form, appears as a structure where intervals of protection, thresholds of intervention, zones of suspension, and degrees of exposure operate together within a single, articulated network. Death, within this regime, becomes a constitutive principle of differentiation, determining how far life may expand, where it contracts, which modes of existence are sustained, and which become abandonable. Modern political thought, accordingly, finds in death a privileged analytic knot, the point exposing the ontological relations through which different rationalities of power constitute life. Any future debate into life's ontological constitution must therefore also reconsider the political function of death.

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