



**Citation:** Valagussa, F. (2023). The war behind this war. *Aisthesis* 16(2): 73-80. doi: 10.36253/Aisthesis-14453

**Copyright:** © 2023 Valagussa, F. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<http://www.fupress.com/aisthesis>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## The war behind this war

FRANCESCO VALAGUSSA

Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele  
[valagussa.francesco@hsr.it](mailto:valagussa.francesco@hsr.it)

**Abstract.** This article intends to read the profound dynamics that characterise the current war in the light of certain classical philosophical categories such as the relationship established by Hegel between substance and subject, the difference between the concept of substance and the concept of function as it was discussed by Cassirer, and finally the binomial power over life and right of death reread by Foucault in a biopolitical key. In the light of these polarities, it is in fact possible to identify two opposing worldviews – on which depend two completely different ways of understanding the function of the state, the weight to be ascribed to rights, and even two different ways of conceiving and conducting war – that do not necessarily coincide with the two opposing sides in the field.

**Keywords:** war, Spinoza, Foucault, substance, function.

---

### 1. TWO WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING POWER

The conflict we have been observing over the past two years is not just a war between two states, but also a strife that reveals two different ways of understanding power – let us even say that the battle is between the two major ways of understanding power.

«And they frequently compare – as Spinoza puts it – God’s power to the power of kings» (Spinoza [1675]: 46), but in so doing this power is anthropomorphized: people think of God as a sovereign who possesses his own free will and claims his own right over things. Thinking of God as a human power – human, all too human – people inevitably also end up attributing a kind of impotence to him. The sovereign, moved by a precise intention, wants a certain thing and not another, and for this very reason his power is also limited and constrained: the sovereign uses his power to prevent anything other than what he desires from happening. In contrast, God has no will, he does not even have an intellect of his own, it simply happens, in infinite mode: it is the set of interactions between things that *are there*, the so called *essentia actuosa*.

Let us quote another passage from Spinoza's *Ethics*: «For its preservation the human body needs very many other bodies by which it is continuously (we might say) regenerated» (Ibid.: 60)<sup>1</sup>. Here, too, a certain anthropomorphism should be avoided, because the human body itself is made up of other individuals, of other bodies. In order to take Spinoza's point of view, it is important to think of this *chain of bodies*, which are born and develop in relation to other bodies. Bodies strive to persist and through their cooperation they regenerate, but at the same time they conflict, they clash with each other, so that some bodies succumb first, others later. As we reflect on this interweaving, we see appearing in the background the trade, the cultural exchanges, the buying and selling of goods and services that fuelled the splendour of the United Provinces of the Netherlands during Spinoza's time.

This *divine* interaction has no purpose that can direct or guide it, it has no determined will: it happens as an infinite fabric of connections that always generate and nurture new connections, new contacts, while others are lost. In this respect, it would not be wrong to say that the immense concatenation is *always all* at work, since it is configured as a totality. At the same time, being generative of itself, it is never «already all here in its totality».

For the sake of brevity, we can say that the power of God makes things arise, while the power of the ruler is the power to deny certain things. Let us simplify further: we could call the first «power of life», the other «right of death» (see Foucault [1976])<sup>2</sup>. In its inevitable anthropomor-

<sup>1</sup> See also Spinoza (1675): 173: «human beings, I say, can wish for nothing better for preserving their own being than that all should agree in all things, so that the minds and bodies of all of them compose as it were one mind and one body, and all of them simultaneously endeavour as much as they can to preserve their own being, and all simultaneously pursue what is useful for all in common» – these lines seem a resounding anticipation of Marx's general intellect.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, Foucault uses the pair «right of death» and «power over life» and we will retain this formulation from here

phism, every form of government inclines towards the second model: «without delimitation formation does not take place» (Schlegel [1800]: 77). Every «art of government», in order to establish and maintain its form, must act through delimitations, through negations, i.e. through a «right of death». Seen from afar, the historical evolution of that work of art of European civilization which is the state coincides with the attempt to bring the exercise of power closer to the pure power of life, progressively removing – certainly without ever being able to make it disappear completely – the right of death. To put it better: any exercise of power takes place – by definition – through negation. Perhaps it is more correct to say that the state – despite still being affected by the right of death – endeavours to let the power of life operate as fully as possible, that is to say, literally in its infinite modes, limiting the interference of authority to the minimum necessary.

To use Foucault's effective formula: «The state is envisioned as the regulator of interests and no longer as the transcendent and synthetic principle of the transformation of the happiness of each into the happiness of all» (Foucault [1977-1978]: 346). We can say: from the «principle state» to the «regulating state», i.e. from the state understood as a «synthetic and transcendent» pivot, as the final purpose, into which the happiness of all is channelled and must converge, to the state that allows freedom of trade between private individuals. We are going to analyse the transition from sovereignty to government and governmentality with two samples, just in order to try to render the climate of this transformation.

(a) On the normative level, for instance, the law-discipline-security *clinamen* throws light on a similar dynamic (Ibid.: 44-46). 1) The law of the sovereign is still tied to a binary division between permission and prohibition: «the law works in the

on. We intend, however, to indicate «power over life» as a possibility for moving from the «right of death» to an authentic *power of life* as Spinoza intends it. We still have to use «power over life», instead of *power of life*, because this new form of power is still somehow contaminated by laws, ordinances, and thus by negations of life.

imaginary, since the law imagines and can only formulate all the things that could and must not be done by imagining them. It imagines the negative» (Ibid.: 47). 2) Discipline is the first moment in which we can almost glimpse the birth and spread of a new logic: discipline does not specify what is not to be done, but instead states down to the tiniest detail what is to be done and how to do it; it is, so to speak, the first stammering, still in a stunted language, of a power that does not focus on negation, but is oriented towards affirmation. 3) The security device, on the other hand, «tries to work within reality, by getting the components of reality to work in relation to each other, thanks to and through a series of analyses and specific arrangements» (Ibid.: 47): this *work*, ultimately, turns out to be an essential element of what we call the game of liberalism: «not interfering, allowing free movement, letting things follow their course» (Ibid.), in infinite modes. It is not a matter of restraining (as the law would like to do) or of correcting (as discipline would like to do) certain «social mechanisms», as if someone had the power to do so, intervening from the outside, but rather of regulating them: the apparatus of security is conceived and placed within the game, seeking to reduce the instruments of interdiction or prescription to a minimum.

b) What we have said leads us directly to the second element, namely the economic one. Needless to repeat here Foucault's analysis of the Smith-Kant parallelism around the discovery of the fact that the economic world is by nature opaque and «non-totalisable» by political power (Foucault [1978-1979]: 281)<sup>3</sup>. In stricter terms, we can say that political economy denounces the paralogism of political totalisation of the economic process. No one, not even the king, can do the collective good, in such a way as to promote the happiness of individuals; but each person doing his own interest contributes to the good of the community. The invisible hand replaces providence: there is no wisdom that controls the world from a superior point

of view by imposing its own project. In this sense, Foucault defines economics as an «atheistic discipline» (see Ibid.: 282): the adjective works if, and only if, we understand God as a sovereign, while from a Spinozian point of view, political economy (and a fortiori biopolitics) constitutes itself, absurdly, as a «religious discipline» *par excellence*, almost as an *itinerarium mentis in deo*.

In this radical metamorphosis of power – which can be condensed into the famous *laissez faire* – economy becomes the basic source of legitimization of political power. Here we are seeing a complete reversal in the conception of authority: in Dumézil trifunctional hypothesis – corresponding to three distinct functions: sovereignty, military and productivity (Dumézil [1935]) – authority, understood as that which literally «makes grow» and nourishes the life of the community, is held by the first group, and it is sometimes contested by the second group. The investiture controversy during the Middle Ages, but also the Ksciatriya revolt against the Brâhmani priestly caste (Guenon [2001]: 49-64) are classic examples. Never, as is the case today, the authentic source of *auctoritas* has been considered to be founded on the third group, that of the producers, which has almost engulfed the second, leaving the first with only a few regulatory functions.

## 2. FROM EPIC POEM TO NOVEL

Leopardi would invite us to be wary of «the princely progress of the human race» (*Ginestra*, v. 51): we have not overthrown the «right of death». The market itself, to cite the most resounding example, is configured as the outcome of a precise political construction, even structuring itself as an *eidos* in the Husserlian sense according to Foucault (Foucault [1978-1979]: 120)<sup>4</sup>: it works under certain conditions – even through an abstention

<sup>3</sup> I will summarize here, certainly too quickly, the contents of the lecture of 28 March 1979.

<sup>4</sup> See Foucault [1978-1979]: 120: «They are due to a formal privilege. Competition is an essence. Competition is an *eidos*. Competition is a principle of formalization. Competition has an internal logic; it has its own structure. Its effects are only produced if this logic is respected».

from the exercise of power by states. Wanting to bind life as little as possible, and indeed trying to let it flow as much as possible, the «regulating state» is paradoxically forced to progressively renounce an ever greater part of the «acts of government» that in fact constitute it: it will never be able to completely revoke its «right of death», because maintaining a form always implies some delimitation, but ideally it will tend increasingly to present itself as a «power of life». Indeed, it is not wrong to say that «the state is only an episode in government, and it is not government that is an instrument of the state. Or, at any rate, the state is an episode in governmentality» (Foucault [1977-1978]: 248).

Seen over a long period of time, the the rise of states seems to be only a stage of approximation to governmentality. By analogy, a sentence Mann says about Tolstoj comes to mind: «It is one of the cases that tempt us to reverse the relationship between novel and epic that the school aesthetic maintains, and not to see the novel as a form of decay of the epic, but to see in the epic a primitive preliminary form of the novel» (Mann [1939]: XI, 464). Not the novel as a degeneration of epic, but epic as its primitive form: similarly, not the decadence of sovereignty in governmentality, but governmentality as the overcoming of that archaic conception of power, still linked to the sovereign as a sort of representative on earth of the divine, and of a God badly conceived under anthropomorphic traits.

The state is the place where the «night of sovereignty» still looms over the land, yet already some ray of light is flashing, a sign of an imminent dawn. But the state form is the night that still lasts. Insofar as it is embedded in various forms of union with other nations, the state still tends to retain certain «traits of power» despite everything, even if they are gradually diminishing in number, and yet these gradually become more and more inescapable, i.e. they tend to turn into absolute principles. The construction of the state, aimed at guaranteeing more and more rights to ever larger groups of the population – not out of benevolence of the rulers, but precisely in order to start the

virtuous spiral of the «power of life», which must pass through the power over life: more rights, more consumption; more consumption, more rights – transforms freedom of thought, speech, action, and likewise the principle of the free market, or equality before the law, into absolute axioms on which the entire «geometry of politics» is built. The very imbalance provoked by the ruler in the face of the equality that reigns and must reign among the governed is perceived precisely as a kind of obstacle, a dangerous moment of friction, regarding the need to let life run its course: to put it bluntly, parliament remains the most aristocratic factor within a democratic regime (see Schmitt [1928]: 252).

The analogy with the relationship between epic and the novel might help clarify the situation: in the novel we breathe a total absence of meaning, no totalisation of reality, a slight irony penetrates every page and undermines the pretence of any *Weltanschauung*, to which the *sovereignty* of the epic had accustomed us instead. Such «transcendental homelessness» (Lukács [1916]: 41) is not yet *pure life*: «The “half-art” of the novel, therefore, prescribes still stricter, still more inviolable artistic laws for itself than do the “closed” art form, and these laws are the more binding, the more indefinable and unformulable they are in their very essence: they are laws of rhythm» (Ibid.: 73), the same rhythm to which we are all bound in capitalist societies.

### 3. TOWARDS THE «POWER OVER LIFE»

How can a state gradually approach the *power of life* when it is still centred on the *right of death*? One of the central dynamics seems to us to be the Hegelian shift from substance to subject, a dynamic that could be perfectly expressed, for instance, by the dialectic between land and sea, already present in Hegel's texts and later adopted by Schmitt. Hegel writes that land roots in the family and the limited circles of civilized life, while the sea is the element of industry, of fluidity, of relationship, which pushes beyond the limited circles:

«Courage is necessarily introduced into trade, daring is joined with wisdom. For the daring which encounters the sea must at the same time embrace wariness – cunning – since it has to do with the treacherous, the most unreliable and deceitful element» (Hegel [1837]: 108). The element to which Hegel refers is water, and thus the ocean. «To this deceitfulness and violence man opposes merely a simple piece of wood; confides entirely in his courage and presence of mind; and thus passes from a firm ground to an unstable support, taking his artificial ground with him» (Ibid.). By taking the sea route, individuals risk everything, their property and even their own lives, but it would not be so wrong to say of them what Hegel attributes to the spirit in history: «in this very destruction it works up that existence into a new form, and each successive phase becomes in its turn a material, working on which it exalts itself to a new grade» (Ibid.: 90).

In a word, the dynamic is this: from the land that binds to the ocean that flows.

To put it in typical 20th century terms – perhaps more immediate – we can follow Cassirer in the shift from substance to function. «All the propositions of arithmetic, all the operations that it defines, are related solely to the general properties of a progression; hence they are never directed primarily upon “things” but upon the ordinal relation, which prevails between the elements of certain systematic wholes» (Cassirer [1910]: 38). So we should say: «They need no foreign “basis” (*Substrat*) but mutually sustain and support each other in so far as the position of each in the system is clearly determined by the others» (Ibid.). This means that the essence of numbers is resolved in their position.

The essence of a thing is not its presumed substance, but rather the set of relationships it entertains. We live in a constant tendency to *functionalise* substance: a symbol of these correlations is the stock exchange, which Simmel called «the geometrical focal point of all these changes in valuation, and at the same time the place of greatest excitement in economic life» (Simmel [1900]: 512). The significance of a state, a brewery, a mine or a bank

is not based on their intrinsic qualities, «but on the relationship of these to all other stocks on the market and their conditions» (Ibid.: 327), so that – we are precisely in 1900 – «these wagers on the future quoted price of one stock *themselves have the most considerable influence on such a price*» (Ibid.). This clearly shows «the absolute flexibility of this form of value, a form that the objects have gained through money, and which has completely detached them from their real basis» (Ibid.). The essence thus shifts from substance to function.

This transformation innervates every aspect of life: «For the atom signifies no fixed physical fact, but a logical postulate; it is thus itself not unchanging, but rather a variable expression» (Cassirer [1910]: 156), in the sense that the atom is a mental structure whose function is to make experimental results consistent. At the social level, as we can see every day, we almost never deal with individuals, much more often with professions, sometimes even with virtual profiles; at the political level, the substance of the sovereign, the body of the king (whose head may eventually be cut off) is replaced by members who within institutions and constitutional bodies perform a mere function, they do not embody power in themselves (even if we cut off their heads, others would simply be elected).

Going into more detail about everyday life, let us steal a few lines from Roland Barthes from his analysis of contemporary nourishment: coffee is an exciting, stimulating drink, which is now associated with a moment of pause, since even «food tends to be constantly transformed into a situation of» (Barthes [1961]: 986). Even if «materiality» characterizes the thing in certain terms, the context transforms it by placing it within a broader horizon: the thing is no longer bound to its substantiality, but insofar as it interacts with its environment, it is transformed and performs other functions.

#### 4. THE PARTIES IN THE PLAY

Here it is not a question of labelling the sides in play: it is clear to everyone which of the two

factions has remained anchored to the *right of death* and which is increasingly approaching the *power of life* – without this necessarily implying a value judgement. The two powers actually at play even entered the war in diametrically opposite ways. The first in a *substantial* manner by deploying an army, almost exclusively by land, the second – with perfect consistency – has not even entered directly: it subsidizes, supplies weapons, waging war «without actually touching the ground», if we can put it that way, seeing in the actual deployment of its very army only the last resort.

But even more illustrative of this opposing logic is the way in which the actual war phase came about: the open door policy adopted by NATO during the past few years, although emblematic of a *power over life*, which does not impose barriers, does not deny, rather urges the establishment of new relations, played a certain role. By comparison, the penetration of the capitalist mentality within Eastern Europe had a far greater effect.

The West offers better living conditions, greater freedoms, less oppressive political models, and it does not offer them out of its own benevolence, as a good-natured act: that virtuous, or perhaps vicious, circle that we have summarized with the formula «more rights, more consumption – more consumption, more rights» only works in an expansive manner, the circle must widen at every turn (see Marx [1857-1858]: 407). Eastern Europe constituted the ideal hunting ground for this expansion of production, consumption and thus also of rights: looking after its own interests, the West assumed a somewhat *belligerent* attitude, but the most relevant aspect of the dynamic is the ability of capitalism to penetrate a country without the need to move a tank, while on the other hand we can see the inability on the part of the adversary to stop this *incursion* except by mobilizing tanks and troops. Being forced to use the right of death to try to stop this flow, this power over life – this was the deadly trap, woven with great patience: forcing the other to use force, to a human, all too human reaction.

## 5. SUBSTANTIALITY AND FUNCTIONALISATION

It would be too simple to see the right of death all concentrated on one front and the power over life placed entirely on the opposite side, just as it would be absurd to consider one of the two contenders still entirely rooted in the *forma mentis* of *substance* and the other entirely projected into the *modus operandi* of *function*. For example, trade sanctions – which also function precisely because they exclude the possibility of participating in certain international circuits – are impositions that still refer to a right of death, a limit imposed on the adversary, a restriction that prevents the pure flow of life: a *right of death* that in fact also affects the West itself. Conversely, the attempt to influence – especially on the level of information – the countries belonging to the adversary bloc show the ability to *play the game* also on the level of functionality and not only of substance.

Beneath the explicit war being fought on the two fronts, there is a subterranean war, between factions that are not immediately identifiable with a state or a group of states: it is a question of verifying the *degree of emancipation* that the social brain has achieved and is able to exhibit with respect to its *substantial* limits. We could also ask: how far can functionalization now ignore substance? We see a friction: substance still wants to have a role to play in relation to (and against) the prevailing process of functionalization.

The most immediate reference concerns energy resources: the right of death denies a resource in order to undermine the entire functional network on which the power over life flourishes, and immediately the social brain ingeniously sets out to compensate for this intrinsic limitation – both in the short term, by diversifying the sources of supply, and in the long term, by thinking of forms of energy production to replace the previous ones.

Another immediate reference concerns the nuclear weapon: from a functional point of view, i.e. in this case from a Western perspective, it would be sheer madness to employ it; however, from a *substantial* point of view, i.e. of those who

feel their very existence threatened, the option does not seem so crazy. In other words, the atom bomb represents a substantial factor, not reducible to a merely *functional* analysis.

Lastly, one could also mention the attitude of the population: the long-cultivated familiarity with the *power over life* as opposed to a certain acquaintance with the *right of death* trains and encourages very different attitudes. A society such as the western one may be induced to support certain ideals, but the cost of this support – in case that the battle comes to affect material goods – will gradually prove to be increasing; with another type of set-up, on the other hand, sacrifice can be demanded and perpetuated by means of completely different instruments and relying on a resilience entrusted to quite different dynamics.

These are just three examples to illustrate the situation. On the one hand, functionalisation still runs the risk of bearing the brunt of the constraints imposed by the substantive dimension. On the other hand, the functional always tries to free itself from all constraints. There is no doubt, however, that – over and above the outcome of the war, the proclamation of winners and losers – the conflict works as a powerful intensifying factor of the conflict that takes place beneath the surface. Functionalisation is testing the degree of independence achieved with respect to substantive factors, but more generally, power of life is testing its ability to free itself from the right of death.

#### 6. THE TWO FORMS OF WAR: HESIOD AND SIMMEL

In his *Works and the Days*, Hesiod says that on earth there is not just one kind of strife, but there are two: one is reprehensible, the other is praised (see Hesiod [1988]: 37). The first is the brute one; it is the one that promotes war, bringing conflict and discord. The other can rouse even the shiftless one to work: the idle man looks towards another, who is rich, and hastens to sow and plant and manage the household well. And so the neighbour emulates the one who aspires

to wealth. It is a good strife, so writes Hesiod: the potter is piqued with the potter, the joiner with the joiner, and so on.

This passage could be compared with a page from Simmel's *Sociology*, where again a distinction is made between two forms of struggle (Simmel [1908]: 260). There is a struggle in which the prize is already in the hands of one of the parties, for example the spoils possessed by a city. Then there is another form of struggle, in which the subjective antagonistic incitement leads us to the realization of objective values. In this kind of strife, one turns against his opponent without touching him, but above all, victory is not the outcome of the fight, allowing one of the two to grab the spoils, but the realisation of a value that lies beyond the fight itself. This type of clash is called competition, and the value realised in the struggle is the opening of a new market of buyers of a good that did not exist before and whose creation is precisely the outcome of the competition itself.

If we try to connect these two pages written by Hesiod and Simmel to our discourse, we see that war, i.e., the brute strife, is still linked to a *substantialist* vision, to the substance of things, to the presence of a spoil to be conquered; the other type of contention, i.e., competition, seems to fit better with what we have called functionalism, that tendency to free oneself from conditioning, opening up new paths and inaugurating new spaces. Competition tends, asymptotically, to overcome war, as a mode of contention, just as function tends to free itself from all substantiality and *power over life* to free itself from all *right of death* – tending towards an unimaginable *power of life*. A thousand little daily competitions that almost disengage the energy needed to fight real wars.

On the one hand, the ideal underlying the first block (competition, function, power over life) will never be fulfilled except through the complete overcoming of the second (war, substance, right of death). On the other hand, this second block manifests its insuperability by the mere fact of existing, of continuing – in one way or another – simply to be there, as an always available option to solve conflicts between sides.

## REFERENCES

- Barthes, R., 1961: *Pour une psycho-sociologie de l'alimentation contemporaine*, "Annales Histoire Sciences Sociales" 16 (5), pp. 977-986.
- Cassirer, E., 1910: *Substance and Function*, Dover, New York, 1953.
- Dumézil, G., 1935: *Flamen-Brahman*, Geuthner, Paris.
- Foucault, M., 1976: *Will to knowledge. The history of sexuality I*, ed. by A.I. Davidson, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014.
- Foucault, M., 1977-1978: *Security, Territory, Population*, ed. by M. Senellart, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009.
- Foucault, M., 1978-1979: *The Birth of Biopolitics*, ed. by M. Senellart, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008.
- Guenon, R., 2001: *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power*, ed. by S.D. Fohr, Sophia Perennis, New York.
- Hegel, G.W.F., 1837: *The Philosophy of History*, ed. by J. Sibree, Batoche Books, Kitchener, 2001.
- Hesiod, 1988: *Works and Days*, ed. by M.L. West, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York.
- Lukács, G., 1916: *The Theory of The Novel*, ed. by A. Bostock, The Merlin Press, London, 1971.
- Mann, T., 1939: *Die Kunst des Romans*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. XI, Aufbau-Verlag, Berlin, 1955.
- Marx, K., 1857-1858: *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin, London, 1993.
- Schlegel F., 1800: *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania, 1968.
- Schmitt, C., 1928: *Constitutional Theory*, ed. by J. Seitzer, Duke University Press, Durham-London, 2008.
- Simmel, G., 1900: *The Philosophy of Money*, ed. by D. Frisby, Routledge, London-New York, 2004.
- Simmel, G., 1908: *Sociology. Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, ed. by A.J. Blasi, A.K. Jacobs, M. Kanjrathinkal, 2 Voll., Brill, Boston, 2009.
- Spinoza, B., 1675: *Ethics. Proved in Geometrical Order*, edited by M.J. Kisner, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018.