

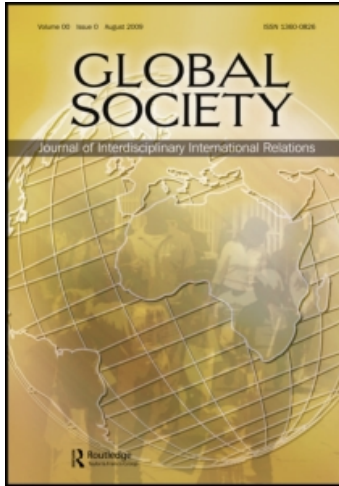
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### “... we are being left to burn because we do not count” : Biopolitics, Abandonment, and Resistance

Anna Selmeczi

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## “... we are being left to burn because we do not count”<sup>\*</sup>: Biopolitics, Abandonment, and Resistance

ANNA SELMECZI<sup>\*\*</sup>

*Starting from the puzzle posed by the ultimate aim of modern governmental rationality to nurture the population and its tendencies to exclude large parts of the same population from the spectrum of its care, this article argues that abandonment is always already inscribed into this rationality. In contradiction to Agamben, abandonment here is not attributed to the sovereign exception but is traced back to modern processes transforming the political—as problematised by Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Complementing their observations with the empirical and the anti-political implications of “the count” based on Ian Hacking’s and Jacques Rancière’s thought, first a conceptual framework for understanding biopolitical abandonment is outlined, then the materialisation of abandonment is assessed. Arriving finally at the possibility of thinking resistance to the power that disallows life through conceiving of politics as disruption, the final section discusses the South African shack-dwellers’ struggle that, on occasions, is able to disturb the dynamics of abandonment and so potentially furthers the conceptualisation of resistance to biopolitics.*

... the people is those who, refusing to be the population, disrupt the system.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Michel Foucault once said that one of the biggest antinomies of modern political reason was the coexistence of “large destructive structures and institutions oriented toward the care of individual life”.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, if modern governmental

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<sup>\*</sup> Abahlali baseMjondolo, “Fire Devastates the Kennedy Road Settlement—At Least One Hundred Homes are Destroyed”, Press Release (16 June 2009).

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1. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 66.

2. *Idem*, “The Political Technology of Individuals”, in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), p. 147.

rationality includes a strong element of pastoral care and centres on the well-being of each and all, then what should we make of the extreme marginalisation of millions inherent in the dynamics of global neoliberal governance? How is it possible that a rationality that defines its ultimate aim as the nurturing of the population nevertheless accommodates the abandonment of huge masses of people? The answer seems to lie in understanding the ways in which abandonment is always already inscribed into it. This paper aims to provide such an understanding and, by way of pointing to instances where the inscribed abandonment is challenged, attempts to offer a possible (although as yet rudimentary) conceptualisation of resistance against biopolitical governance. This problematic seems all the more important in the context of recent contributions to a debate within the discipline of International Relations (IR) about the potentials of Foucault's thought and the biopolitics literature drawing on it. Whereas this literature certainly has its limits—the failure to provide a conception of resistance so far seems to be one of these—recourse to a more traditional, state-centred, or territorial theorisation of the political seems even less likely to address present-day problems of marginalisation and community. Therefore, in what follows, starting from Hannah Arendt's and Foucault's observations on the modern transformation of the political, then focusing on the empirical (Ian Hacking) and the (anti-)political (Jacques Rancière) implications of "the count", in the first two sections I construct a conceptual framework for understanding biopolitical abandonment. Having drawn the conceptual outlines, based on Rancière's aesthetic approach to politics, the materialisation of abandonment is assessed. Finally, arriving at the possibility of thinking resistance to the power that disallows life through Rancière's concept of politics as disruption, the final section discusses the South African shack-dwellers' struggle that, on occasions, appears to be able to disturb the dynamics of abandonment.

One of the existing attempts to understand how abandonment is inherent in modern rationalities of rule is Giorgio Agamben's, who takes up Foucault's concept of biopolitics—according to which the governmental concern for the well-being of the people implies that the human as a biological being enters the realm of the political—but argues that politics and biological life had always been tied together. For Agamben, modernity only sheds light on and reaffirms the fact that "the inclusion of bare life into the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power".<sup>3</sup> Therefore, he claims, it is crucial to study sovereign and biopolitical models of power in parallel, because it is in the very intersection of these two—in the ambiguous zone of the sovereign exception—that we can locate bare life: the life that can be taken without committing homicide and to which we are all reduced contemporarily.

That Agamben's theorisation of modernity through the notion of exception and bare life resonates with perceptions of our present is reflected (among others) in poststructuralist IR literature which, in recent years, eagerly took up these conceptions. Accounts that took as their analytical point of departure Agamben's claim that the (concentration) camp is the paradigm of modernity were able to show how bare life is produced through the obscured interplay of sovereign power and biopolitics on sites such as the refugee camp or the detainment

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3. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 6.

camp.<sup>4</sup> Doubtlessly, *homo sacer* is an expressive concept when interrogating the operation of power in such loci. However, assuming that the operation of biopower inevitably leads to the camp and bare life produced in it can also limit our understanding of the contemporary because this assumption, through forging a connection between the sovereign exception and biopower, generalises a distribution of power that Foucault referred to as the state of domination.<sup>5</sup> As opposed to relations of power that, in Foucault's conceptualisation,<sup>6</sup> can always be reversed and that are always conditioned upon the freedom of its parties to this reversal, states of domination hardly allow for resistance.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, accounts of resistance in refugee or detainment camps disclose forceful but limited practices of resistance taking shape in individual performances such as lip-sewing and refugee poetry.<sup>8</sup>

Yet biopower is not at all bound to operate in relations of domination. On the contrary, a vast part of the literature based on Foucault's conceptualisation of modern power and, in particular, his conception of biopolitics, analyses how biopolitical technologies of government are deployed through the freedom of the governed.<sup>9</sup> Observing this aspect does not necessarily mean disregarding the dark side of biopolitics. Indeed, Foucault famously defined modern power as "the power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death".<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in an attempt to understand in what ways abandonment is inscribed in modern governmental rationality and consequently to be able to conceptualise resistance to contemporary biopolitical abandonment without equating biopolitical abandonment with the sovereign exception (the sovereign ban),<sup>11</sup> I suggest using a different focal

4. See, for example, Jenny Edkins, "Sovereign Power, Zones of Indistinction, and the Camp", *Alternatives: Social Transformation & Humane Governance*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2000), pp. 3–27; Jenny Edkins and Veronique Pin-Fat, "Through the Wire: Relations of Power and Relations of Violence", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2005), pp. 1–24.

5. Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom", in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. I: *Ethics* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 281–301.

6. Michel Foucault, "Subject and Power", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1982), pp. 777–795.

7. On Foucault's distinction between relationships of power, states of domination, and government (an intermediary category understood broadly as the conduct of conduct) see Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power: From Hobbes to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 96–136. It is based on the Foucauldian conception of power as "action upon the actions of others"—or, as Hindess formulates it, as "an ubiquitous feature of human interaction"—that Laura Zanotti criticises Agambenian interpretations of liberalism. In line with what is stated above, Zanotti argues that the government of disorderly states does not "produce totalizing effects of domination". Instead, through conducting the conduct of states to be disciplined, normalisation inscribes spaces of resistance that allow for diverting and hijacking its original agendas, as in the case of the international attempts to secure order in Croatia. Cf. Laura Zanotti, "Normalizing Democracy and Human Rights: Discipline, Resistance, and Carceralization in Croatia's Euro-Atlantic Integration", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2008), pp. 222–250.

8. See Edkins and Pin-Fat, *op. cit.*; Prem Kumar Rajaram, "Disruptive Writing and a Critique of Territoriality", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2004), pp. 201–228.

9. See, for example, Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism, and Rationalities of Government* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 138; emphasis in original.

11. While I do not engage here in a detailed discussion of Agamben's notion of abandonment as the sovereign exception, it is not my intention to dismiss it completely. As mentioned below in relation to the notion of superfluity, and as the above references to analyses of power and resistance in

lens than that of Agamben (that is the “bare life”), although my point of departure is, similarly, Arendt’s and Foucault’s observations on the biologisation of the political.<sup>12</sup>

### The Naturalisation of the Political

Choosing to proceed through this alternative perspective implies that the present discussion problematises characteristically modern phenomena: both biopolitical abandonment and the governmental rationality into which it is inscribed emerged with modernity and neither of them is (directly) tied to ancient sovereign models of power. Thus, the primary question has to address the shift in the forms of power occurring with modernity. What is it in modernity that forces sovereign power to retreat and makes way to a mode of power that either fosters life or abandons it? As hinted at above, enabling this form of power is an assemblage which, based on Arendt’s and Foucault’s parallel observations, André Duarte refers to as the “naturalization of the political”.<sup>13</sup> This process, the ultimate outcome of which is that the political is refocused on the biological existence of humanity,<sup>14</sup> comprises a series of naturalisations, that is, the serial reconceptualisation of certain phenomena as driven by the laws of nature.

If we want to reconstruct the sequence of this series (bearing in mind that its elements are in constant interaction), it seems appropriate to start with the emergence of economy, that is, when economy had begun to be thought about as an autonomous field of intervention and as a fundamental organising principle and was complemented by its correlative forms of knowledge, political economy in particular. For Arendt, the emergence of economy coincides with

contemporary Camps show, this concept indeed has relevance in certain situations. Nevertheless, its relevance cannot be extended to all manifestations of biopolitical abandonment, for these, I believe, are more often inscribed not into states of domination but into governmental rationalities and practices characteristic of biopolitical models of power. This is precisely what enables and at once necessitates thinking resistance to their inscription. As Didier Bigo argues, Agamben criticises Foucault’s very conception of the indivisibility of power and resistance: “For him, and contrary to Foucault, the polarization between power and bare life is possible and in fact drives all the contemporary practices of power, including those of liberal states and democracies.” The conception of this polarisation is made possible by Agamben’s reduction of Jean-Luc Nancy’s notion of the ban. This reduction, according to Bigo, implies that “by exaggerating the capacity of the actors speaking in the name of the sovereign and by essentialising sovereignty through a conception that plays against (yet with) the rule of law [...] Agamben ignores the resistance of the weak and their capacities to continue to be humane and to subvert the illusory dream of total control”. Didier Bigo, “Detention of Foreigners, States of Exception, and the Social Practices of the Control of the Banopticon”, in Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (eds.), *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory’s Edge* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 3–33. For a criticism of Agamben’s “political nihilism” that entails dismissing “all political options in our societies” see further Ernesto Laclau, “Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?”, in Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (eds.), *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty & Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 11–22.

12. See Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

13. André Duarte, “Biopolitics and the Dissemination of Violence: The Arendtian Critique of the Present”, HannahArendt.net, available: <<http://hannaharendt.net/research/biopolitics.html>> (accessed 21 June 2009).

14. See the most quoted “definition” of biopolitics: “For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being into question” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *op. cit.*, p. 143).

the construction of society, and so contributes to the blurring of the line of division between the private and the public realms.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, as will be shown in this paper too, the conception of anciently distinct private and political realms is problematic. Nevertheless, as Patricia Owens writes, Arendt “did not believe that the public and private sphere were entirely unrelated”; “she argued that there are distinct principles and motives for political action”.<sup>16</sup> While these claims still need to be assessed from the perspective defined by the conception of the political that the discussion below draws on, Arendt’s following observation is still important: with economy being applied to the “super-human family” of a modern state and the outlines of a “collective housekeeping” being drawn, biological necessities of the human are channelled into the political realm. At the core of this development is the assumption of a “‘collective’ concern” that includes the concern for the well-being of society as a whole.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in citing Gundar Myrdal, Arendt states: “economics can be a science only if one assumes that one interest pervades society as a whole”.<sup>18</sup> For Arendt, this “communistic fiction” of liberal utilitarianism implies nothing less than the subjection of the human potential for action to a universal behavioural pattern. This pattern, in turn, lends itself to forms of scientific knowledge that operate by and produce predictions on the large scale, so rendering individual action invisible and outstanding deeds deviant.

Claiming that the general framework of biopolitics is liberalism (understood as an art of government), Foucault reconstructs a very similar process of transformation.<sup>19</sup> Hence, it is the *économiste* critique of mercantilism to which he traces back the emergence of biopolitics. In straight opposition to mercantilist restrictions intended to avoid the harmful effects of the market, classical economists of the 18th century viewed the market as directed by natural forces that, when unobstructed, strive for harmony. Therefore, instead of intervening in their flows, proper government must let “things follow their course”.<sup>20</sup> Through such notions as the “true price” that is formulated by natural economic dynamics, the market is now reconstructed as a site of *veridiction* and the sovereign is thought of as incapable of fully grasping the truth of the market. Consequently, “the principle of the self-limitation of governmental reason” appears.<sup>21</sup>

Crucially, this self-limitation based on the naturalisation of the market brings about the naturalisation of the subject of government. When individuals come to be seen as linked to the natural economic processes through their “longevity, health, and ways of conducting themselves”, a new target of government is formed: the population.<sup>22</sup> Once the attention of the sovereign is refocused from the individual—as the subject of rights but also as the subject/object of disciplinary power—to the populational level, rationality and practices of power change radically. The sovereign gaze—that now becomes governmental—will no longer

15. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 28–29.

16. Patricia Owens, “Hannah Arendt”, in Jenny Edkins and Nick Vaughn-Williams (eds.), *Critical Theorists in International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 37.

17. Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

19. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 22.

20. *Idem*, *Security, Territory, Population*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

21. *Idem*, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

focus on the actions and behaviours of individuals, but on the natural processes of the population into which individuals are massified by the forms of knowledge attached to political economy. Here again, the intention to regulate the aggregate processes of the population implies the assumption of interest being the sole motivating force: a universal, through which this conglomerate governmental subject/object is accessible and can be governed towards its well-being. “[T]he population taken as a whole has one and only one mainspring of action. This is desire.”<sup>23</sup> Beyond designating “the entry of a ‘nature’ into the field of techniques of power”, the collective interest of the population, which adds up from the interests of its benefit-seeking elements, becomes the ultimate end of government.<sup>24</sup>

It is exactly here that Foucault’s aphoristic claim about the major transformation of the forms of power is situated. At the core of this claim is the shift in the main problem of those who govern: with the market reconstructed as a site of truth-telling and with the desires of the population reconstructed as the forces defining the collective interest (which, in turn, is conceptualised as the end of government) sovereign power inevitably retreats. Therefore, the central problem of government will no longer be how and on what legal bases the sovereign can say no to the subject of right under its rule, but how to say yes to desire. When the sovereign no longer has direct hold on its subjects (including both their belongings and their lives) and when the aim of governmental power becomes the regulation of economically relevant processes through the population and for the population, then indeed it seems that “the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death”.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the power to foster life implies the proper stimulation or encouragement of interests present in the massified subject/object of the population.

But what does it mean to disallow life to the point of death? What, in fact, could be thought of as “negative biopolitics”?<sup>26</sup> In order to answer this question we have to revisit the interrelated implications of the naturalising processes discussed above. On the one hand, and according to Arendt, with the subsumption of human actions to a behavioural pattern defined by the collective concern, the plurality and contingency of individuality is eliminated from the construction of the (neither private nor public) social sphere:

It is decisive that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.<sup>27</sup>

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23. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

25. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, *op. cit.*, p. 138; original emphasis. It is exactly this shift that cannot be captured when accepting Agamben’s claim on the ancient bond between sovereign and biopolitical models of power.

26. “Perhaps if Foucault could have seen the way African ‘demography’ is ‘regulated’ by the AIDS epidemic (and a number of other epidemics, all monitored by a ‘World Health Organization’), he might have ventured to speak of ‘negative bio-politics’” (Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 38).

27. Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

In Foucauldian terms and from the perspective of the art of government, the elimination of the individual occurs (also) through the discussed rescaling of the target of government. It is now the processes at the populational level which are pertinent, and not the actions or behaviours occurring at the level of individuals or the multiplicity of individuals. This implies that the sovereign attention that still persisted in the omnipresent disciplinary gaze focusing on the individual body is, at least at the primary level of government, replaced by a generalising gaze of a massifying power. Betterment is now supposed to take place at the level of "life in general".<sup>28</sup>

Betterment of life at this level of generality, in turn, is unimaginable without the forms of knowledge that are meant to grasp it in its totality. Biopower is, after all, that which brought "life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculation and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life".<sup>29</sup> Economics, demography, epidemiology and, most importantly perhaps, statistics, provided the indivisible epistemic element for these two eliminatory aspects of the biopolitics of "man-as-species".<sup>30</sup>

The laws of statistics are valid only where large numbers or long periods are involved, and acts or events can statistically appear only as deviations or fluctuations [...] The application of the law of large numbers and long periods to politics or history signifies nothing less than the wilful obliteration of their very subject matter, and it is a hopeless enterprise to search for meaning in politics or significance in history when everything that is not everyday behavior or automatic trends has been ruled out as immaterial.<sup>31</sup>

Foucault's more nuanced meditation on the differences between the relationship of the regulatory biopolitics of the man-as-species and the disciplinary biopolitics of the man-as-body to the "norm" and the "normal" leads to similar conclusions. Whereas disciplinary techniques are based on the differentiation of the normal individual from the abnormal individual according to a set norm, regulatory techniques deduct the normal distribution of cases from statistical trends, and if the actual distribution diverges from the normal then it is this composite line of divergence that has to be acted upon. Indeed, as Ian Hacking argues, when society became statistical, the notion of "normal people" gained shape—with enormous consequences:

People are normal if they conform to the central tendency of [social] laws, while those at the extremes are pathological. Few of us fancy being pathological, so "most of us" try to make ourselves normal, which in turn affects what is normal.<sup>32</sup>

It is thus almost impossible to underestimate the significance of the emergence of statistical knowledge.<sup>33</sup> What the will to statistical knowledge brought along was

28. Michel Foucault, *"Society Must be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 241.

29. *Idem*, *History of Sexuality*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

30. *Idem*, *"Society Must be Defended"*, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

31. Arendt, *op. cit.*, pp. 42–43.

32. Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 2.

33. Or, to borrow Hacking's term, "the avalanche of printed numbers" (*ibid.*).



nothing less than the absolutisation or, put better, the literalisation of the count. What does this slightly farfetched phrase refer to? Clearly, if the primary aim of the fetishistic wave of data collection in the first half of the 19th century tackled by Hacking's analysis was acquiring knowledge of and intervening in phenomena related to the life of the population, its primary effect was categorisation. "Enumeration demands *kinds* of things or people to count. Counting is hungry for categories."<sup>34</sup> Once categories are defined, not one case of death, disease, or profession will escape clustering; and this is so even if categories themselves change.<sup>35</sup> "[B]ureaucrats [...] designed easily countable classifications, into which everybody had to fall—and thenceforth did".<sup>36</sup>

This is where "literalisation of the count" falls into place and Jacques Rancière's work appears to be worthy of much more than an intertextual reference. In his conceptualisation of the paradoxical relationship between politics and philosophy, political philosophy features as always aiming to impede the occurrence of the political by accounting for all parts of the community and distributing forms of participation accordingly. That is, according to Rancière, political philosophy—and thus the common good—is conditioned upon tying political idealities to the appropriate parts of the community; upon "a count whose complexities may mask a fundamental miscount [...] the very wrong that is the stuff of politics".<sup>37</sup> As we will see below, politics is always the processing of this fundamental miscount: it is always the confrontation of the supposedly total count of the police order with a part that is unaccounted for. What is to be considered at this point of our discussion is, however, this: what happens to the miscount when modern social science appears? In Rancière's interpretation, when social science of the 19th century emerges and becomes the form of existence political philosophy has taken ever since, politics is eliminated. When "exhaustive counting mechanisms" are introduced, the sum of its parts will finally be equal to the people. "Such a people, present in the form of its statistical reduction, is a people transformed into an object of knowledge and prediction that sends appearance and its polemics packing."<sup>38</sup> The count thus reaches perfection when it becomes literal.

Taking a look at the earliest phase of this process through the example of the classification of occupations will be illustrative. Hacking notes that in the beginning of the 19th century, the classification of people in terms of occupation changed radically: categories were formulated with the aim of facilitating the all-encompassing count. While the industrial revolution in itself could justify a drive for the enumeration of proliferating professions, the timing of "statistical enthusiasm" between two revolutionary years (those of 1832 and 1848) suggests that the desire to count everything was conceived of as a means of containing

34. Ian Hacking, "Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers", *Humanities in Society*, Vol. 5 (1982), p. 280; original emphasis.

35. "[N]ational and provincial censuses amazingly show that the categories into which people fall change every ten years. Social change creates new categories of people, but counting is no mere report of developments. It elaborately, often philanthropically creates new ways for people to be" (Ian Hacking, "Making up Individuals", in Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sosna and David E. Welbery (eds.), *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 223.

36. Hacking, "Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers", *op. cit.*, p. 280.

37. Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 6.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

insurgency: "Find out more about your citizens, cried the conservative enthusiasts, and you will ameliorate their conditions, diminish their restlessness, and strengthen their character."<sup>39</sup> The echo of Foucault's notion of biopolitics in this paraphrase is not, of course, arbitrary. Neither can thus be the episode cited by Rancière to illustrate a speech scene within which political subjectification disrupts the police order—as the textual locus of disruption is a concrete classification: that of recognised professions. When in 1832 revolutionary Auguste Blanqui declared to the jury that his profession is "proletarian" and redefined "profession" as "a profession of faith, a declaration of membership of a collective", the count of the police order had been disturbed by the political subjectification of a part that had been unaccounted for.<sup>40</sup> The proletariat was not equivalent to a social group, neither did it become a profession once the judge, accepting Blanqui's redefinition of the term, ordered adding "proletarian" to the list of professions. Understanding this speech event as a disruption of the police order seems to be justified when considering what, according to Rancière, the role of "occupation" is within ordering: "The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed."<sup>41</sup> With political philosophy giving way to a social science that thus vastly outshone the wildest dreams of statistical enthusiasts, miscounts based on which such scenes can be staged were largely effaced: politics had been eliminated.

### Abandoning the Superfluous

It would be rather odd to claim that the above interpretation of Arendt, Foucault, and Rancière add up to a perfect prism, looking through which will provide a full view of the way abandonment is inscribed into modern governmental rationality. However, a parallel reading of their conceptions on how, in interaction with the emergence of the social, political philosophy and governmental rationality has been transformed and what this implies, productively enlarges our perspective on the workings of this inscription.<sup>42</sup> If we had to condense the composite picture we thus gain, its key element would certainly be the emergence of the aggregate subject/object of government: the "super-human family" or the population. In Foucault's genealogy we have seen that the appearance of this massified domain resulted in the rescaling of governmental rationality and practices: while neither sovereign nor disciplinary modes of power disappear, in the primary focus of governmental concern are now natural processes that are pertinent only at the level of the population; trivially implying that processes below this level are of no pertinence. Whereas Foucault explicitly chooses to trace the emergence of biopower "not at the level of political theory, but rather

39. Hacking, "Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers", *op. cit.*, p. 281.

40. Rancière, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

41. *Idem*, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 12.

42. Thus, I do not wish to suggest that there is a continuum of thought around the notions of abandonment or superfluity in the work of the authors discussed; in fact, at points, there are significant tensions between them. While some of these are mentioned below, the discussion of discontinuities is not the object of this article. My aim here is rather to place the referred authors' concepts into interaction, so that they illuminate each other and thus shed some light on aspects of the problematic of abandonment that has remained obscure in current discussions.

at the level of the mechanisms, techniques, and technologies of power",<sup>43</sup> through nearing his analysis to Arendt's and Rancière's thought we also get a view from the perspective of the former level.<sup>44</sup> From this angle, as was hinted at above, we encounter the incommensurability of the political and the statistical reduction called population.

The super-human family is incapable of spontaneous action: its behaviour is determined by social laws.<sup>45</sup> Identical to the sum of its parts, the population is incapable of creating scenes of appearance: it is walled up into a "homogeneous regime of the visible".<sup>46</sup> We must not overlook the implications of this homogeneity as, on the one hand, it represents the main feature of the post-democratic order, that is, of the order that emerges after political philosophy takes the form of social science and any acting out of *dissensus* is ruled out by the consensus of public opinion. When everyone "is included in advance, every individual is the nucleus and image of a community of opinions that are equal to parties", there is no representable barrier.<sup>47</sup> Unlike previous ages, which unabashedly divided those worthy of political life from the dumb rest, the consensus-discourse that wages war on "exclusion" impedes the polemical construction thereof.<sup>48</sup>

Taking a look at the level of governmental rationality and practices again, we find an early parallel to the consensual overwriting of representable barriers in the form of the modern readjustment of the divisions that determine proper government. As opposed to the primary problem of the age of *raison d'état*, once the market had been reconstructed as a site of *veridiction*, the question facing the sovereign will not be whether his rule is legitimate or it violates the rights of its subjects. The internal limitation against which the formulating liberal governmental reason keeps running up establishes a new division:

[T]his governmental reason will not divide subjects between an absolutely reserved dimension of freedom and another dimension of submission which is either consented to or is imposed. In fact, the division is not made within individuals, men, or subjects, but in the very domain of governmental practice, or rather within governmental practice itself, between the operations that can be carried out and those that cannot, between what to do and the means to use on the one hand, and what not to do on the other.<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, the decision between what must be done and what should be left to its own dynamics is conceived of not as the object of sovereign decision but as directed by the nature of the objects of governance, the truth of which, as mentioned above, the sovereign would be incapable of comprehending and

43. Foucault, "Society Must be Defended", *op. cit.*, p. 241.

44. On the Arendtian aspect of Rancière's thought see Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Rancière's Political Ontology", *Theory and Event*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2003).

45. Even if these laws are probabilistic and contain an element of contingency, so constituting the crux of security apparatuses. On this aspect of biopolitical governance see Michael Dillon, "Governing through Contingency: The Security of Biopolitical Governance", *Political Geography*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2007), pp. 41–47.

46. Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

48. For a bizarrely nostalgic description of the contrasting rationalisation of exclusion in the past see Rancière, *ibid.*

49. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

controlling. Frugal government of the “modest state” leaves limited choices to both governed and governor. In our post-democratic present, which, in many senses, brought along the perfection of the discussed features of liberal governmental rationality, the assumption of powerlessness becomes ever more crucial:

The legitimacy of state power is [...] reinforced by the very affirmation of its impotence, of its lack of choice faced with the world-wide necessity it is dominated by. The theme of the common will is replaced by that of the lack of personal will, of capacity for autonomous action that is anything more than just management of necessity.<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately, if the above redrawn trajectory is tenable, the interrelated emergence of the economic and social realms as autonomous fields of intervention—through the naturalisation of the processes attributed to them—leads to the elimination of contingency from both the subject/object and the act of governance. Thus, to put it in Arendtian terms, human being becomes superfluous.<sup>51</sup> Hence, by way of this term, we arrived at the phenomenon that can be understood as the abandonment inscribed in modern governmental rationality, that is, biopolitical abandonment. But how exactly are biopolitical abandonment and superfluity related? Preserving our twofold perspective and first looking at the realm of governmental rationality, here again we are led to the pertinence of the population and the non-pertinence of anything below its aggregate level. Considering Foucault’s discussion of the event of scarcity, however, also clarifies why non-pertinence can at once be understood as superfluity. When scarcity, conceived of as a scourge that affects both the individual and the whole population and must therefore be avoided, is replaced by a conception of scarcity as a chimera that exists at the level of individuals or particular multiplicities of individuals, but does not affect the population as the aggregate object of government, letting people die becomes integrated into governmental rationality. Securing against the emergence of scarcity at the pertinent level of the population means allowing it to develop on particular sites and affecting particular individuals or groups on the non-pertinent level. “The scarcity-scurge disappears, but the scarcity that causes the death of individuals not only does not disappear, it must not disappear.”<sup>52</sup> We could thus say that modern governmental rationality that aims at the well-being of the population entails a certain “perspectival superfluity”: the particular sites and people on which natural processes are

50. Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

51. For Arendt, superfluity features primarily as the aim of totalitarian regimes, for which, as a result of their aim to speed up the progress of the (human) race towards its historical fate, the human potential for spontaneous action is unnecessary, and so—this potential being what makes it what it is—human itself becomes superfluous. In her view, this aim had only been achieved in the concentration camps where, being reduced to mere corpses, human beings were indeed lacking the capacity for action. (This sense of superfluity can be read as Agamben’s *homo sacer*.) Beyond this notion, however, Arendt uses the term in another, more literal sense: referring to stateless people and the millions of unemployed who were excluded from the protected sphere of their nation-states because they were, for various reasons, unwanted. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976). Bauman’s notion of “waste” is very expressive of this state superfluity. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (London: Polity Press, 2004). Cf. Bernard Ogilvie, “Violence et représentation: la production de l’homme jetable”, *Lignes*, Vol. 26 (1995), pp. 113–141.

52. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

allowed to take effect are superfluous from the perspective of the goals to be achieved at the massified level.

Perspectival superfluity, however, is necessarily paired with political superfluity—and not only because the impotency or self-limitation of government facing the necessities of natural dynamics ultimately evacuates anything reminiscent of *virtù* from governmental reason.<sup>53</sup> As we have seen above, constructing and rendering governable the economic and the social is conditioned upon forms of knowledge for which the singularity of human action and consequently politics—the appearance of this action—is superfluous as well. Behavioural patterns following natural laws and the homogeneity of public opinion are antithetical to contingency understood—by Arendt—as the correlate of freedom; as the potentiality of “could have been otherwise”.<sup>54</sup> Similarly rooted in the prevalence of necessity and the according reconfiguration of contingency and freedom,<sup>55</sup> the interaction of these two forms of superfluity add up to biopolitical abandonment. Subjected to specific governmental rationalities and by way of mobilising, for example, racism or the circulatory imperative of neoliberalism, this biopolitical abandonment can then be understood as the vehicle of the power to disallow life.<sup>56</sup>

### Materialising Superfluity

Having outlined above a possible conceptual answer to our original question addressing the paradoxical relationship between a power that aims at the improvement of life and the extent of abandonment it accommodates, in this section the problem is approached from the perspective of its materialisation. In what forms is the biopower to disallow life deployed? How is superfluity crystallised, and how is it being contested? How can we conceptualise resistance to biopolitical abandonment? Pursuing these questions in parallel reflects Foucault’s claim about the coexistence of power and resistance and his call to study power from the perspective of its capillary ends.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, in order to introduce a possible notion of political resistance into our framework, and due to the analytical potentials of his aesthetic understanding of politics—which shares its Kantian inspirations with many aspects of Foucault’s work—below I draw primarily on Rancière’s key concepts.<sup>58</sup>

53. “Freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli’s concept of *virtù*, the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of *fortuna*” (Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?”, in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 153).

54. John McGowan, *Hannah Arendt: An Introduction* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 101.

55. See Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerro, “The Biopolitics of Security in the 21st Century: An Introduction”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2008), pp. 265–292. For a discussion of the limitations of governmentality theories’ usage of contingency see Jacqueline Best, “Ambiguity, Uncertainty, and Risk: Rethinking Indeterminacy”, *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (2008), pp. 355–374.

56. On the relation of racism and the power to disallow life see Foucault, “*Society Must be Defended*”, *op. cit.*, pp. 239–263. On the “circulatory imperative” see the next section of this paper.

57. See Foucault, *History of Sexuality, op. cit.*; *idem*, “*Society Must be Defended*”, *op. cit.*

58. About his understanding of aesthetics that is at the core of politics see Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics, op. cit.*, p. 13.

Central among these is the concept of the distribution of the sensible. As already alluded to through the ideas of the count (which takes account of the community's parts) and the police (that itself is a distribution of the sensible), this notion refers to an ordering of what is perceptible. It is a double system that at once defines what is common and the distinctive parts' shares and positions in relation to that.

It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics [*la politique*] revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of times.<sup>59</sup>

The distribution of the sensible thus refers to a "certain framing of time and space" that eventually designates forms of exclusion and inclusion.<sup>60</sup> The delineation of positions in relation to what is common (e.g. the capacity to speak) therefore forms a sensible order, which manifests itself in actual topographies. In a narrower sense—centring on the political community—the police order configures a social hierarchy through allocating places and functions to individuals and groups based on their competencies.

In order to see how this aesthetic approach to governance can bring us closer to conceptualising resistance to biopolitical abandonment, let us consider what a biopolitical distribution of the sensible looks like. If biopolitics primarily means that with modernity the biological life of the human being entered the centre of politics, then what is common is biological life itself. Therefore, the "community" is the species, what is at stake is fostering and disallowing life, and places and functions are allotted based on what counts as the life to be fostered and what can be allowed to die. On these terms, and equipped with Rancière's perspective on the political order as a distribution of places and functions, the crystallisation of superfluity can be traced.

Moreover, this perspective provides the point of departure for thinking superfluity's contestation, as for Rancière the main concern of politics (*le politique*) is "to resist the givenness of a place" and consequently the division based on which that place is allocated.<sup>61</sup> Politics thus triggers the re-partitioning of the police logic, a reordering of what is visible and audible, and of what is regarded as political. This latter aspect explains why it generally and necessarily "occurs 'out-of-place', in a place which was not supposed to be political".<sup>62</sup> However, this heterogeneity is not a sufficient condition for politics to happen, for politics is not a default attribute of a specific place or a particular social group—be they within or without the supposed boundaries of the political—hence, it is not alternative distribution of the sensible opposing the police. Instead, politics is an event: a singular act of creating a stage of appearance. This is exactly what "the part

59. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

60. Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics", Paper presented at the "Fidelity to the Disagreement: Jacques Rancière and the Political" conference, Goldsmiths College, London, 16–17 September 2003.

61. Mustafa Dikeç, *Badlands of the Republic: Space, Politics, and Urban Policy* (Malden, MA, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell, 2007), p. 17.

62. Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus", *op. cit.*, p. 4.

that has no part" refers to: those who are uncounted appear so because they cannot be identified with any existing or "real" part of society; they are excess to the count. When they gain visibility as the uncounted people and thus enact the basic miscount, they do so by filling an empty category: the *demos* is, essentially, an empty name. It is filled up with a community of people through the process of subjectification and based on the presumption of equality.

Whereas any logic of the police is the logic of hierarchy, of inequality, politics is the process of equality; it always implements the basic presumption of the equality of any individual being equal with everyone else. The tension from which politics emerges, that is, the fundamental wrong, is exactly this: the heterogeneity of the hierarchical social order and the basic equality of "any speaking being with any other speaking being".<sup>63</sup> A social order is always contingent because it rests on this basic equality:

There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you.<sup>64</sup>

The biopolitical dissolution of this basic equality in the homogeneity of "public opinion" and the "collective interest" works precisely against this "sheer contingency" of social orders. What gives rise to the subjectification of the uncounted if representable barriers are effaced by the triumph of the consensus? As Rancière notes, our time, having renounced the (divisionary) promise of politics, entails a space equally freed of division, that is, "a new configuration of political space, the free development of consensual force adequate to the free and apolitical development of production and circulation".<sup>65</sup> Arguably, (neo-)liberal governmental rationality—guarded by the post-democratic consensus—is a distribution of the sensible that is defined primarily by the necessity of circulation. Thus, the allotment of places and functions reflects above all an account of the capacity or the incapacity to circulate. As such, it crystallises the literal superfluity of globalised capitalism. Let us therefore take a closer look at the circulatory imperative.

The most evident point of departure for this survey is Foucault's differentiation between the territorial rule of the sovereign, the prescriptive rule of disciplinary power and the *laissez-faire* practices of regulatory biopower.<sup>66</sup> This latter model of power operates primarily through apparatuses of security. That is, through assemblages of practices targeting the givens of the domain to be governed in a way that aims to optimise its beneficial processes and minimise those which are potentially detrimental. As Foucault shows in the example of the town, while security apparatuses continue to deploy technologies of power characteristic of sovereign and disciplinary modes of power, their dominant feature is centred on the notion of freedom; freedom not as an ideology but as a technology of power. Freedom as a technology of power implies that reality is allowed to develop according to its own laws—a technology fundamentally featured in liberalism, as

63. *Idem*, *Dis-agreement*, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

65. See Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 6.

66. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, *op. cit.*

Foucault notes.<sup>67</sup> In terms of the governance of the developing town, this takes the shape of facilitating circulation. All the functions (hygiene, internal and external trade, and surveillance) that were expected to be secured by the restructuring of the 18th-century town and that were implemented primarily through the construction of roads through and within the town, aimed at “organizing circulation, eliminating its dangerous elements, making a division between good and bad circulation, and maximizing the good circulation by diminishing the bad”.<sup>68</sup> Hence the substantial division that, preserved and generalised in neoliberal governmental rationalities, defines contemporary topographies within which the literal superfluity of marginalised people is materialised.

A possible illustration of how this happens, of how such topographies are moulded by different rationalities and technologies of power could be the case of American anti-homeless laws discussed by Don Mitchell. Working within the framework of critical geography, Mitchell’s point of departure is the claim that the globalisation of capital is conditioned upon the “production and reproduction of certain *kinds* of spaces” and that “[f]or capital to be free, it must also be fixed in a place”.<sup>69</sup> As a result of the constant circulation of capital and the parallel masking of its need for fixity, places face increasing uncertainty, the antidote of which seems to be the almost unprecedented extent of investment in improving their attractiveness. Redefining attractiveness through such discourses as that of the “livable city”, several cities in the United States complemented projects of building conference halls and sports centres with what Mitchell terms the “annihilation of space by law”: “a legal remedy that seeks to cleanse the streets of those left behind by globalization and other secular changes in the economy by simply erasing the spaces in which they must live”.<sup>70</sup> By means of the anti-homeless laws, a strange combination of disciplinary anatomopolitics and sovereign power is put in place: basic physical needs are criminalised through the prohibition of their practice in public places. As it is only homeless people who are compelled to public urination or sleeping in public spaces, Mitchell’s conclusion that “these laws attempt not just the annihilation of space, but also the annihilation of the people who live in it” seems to be grounded.<sup>71</sup> Beyond disciplinary and sovereign technologies of power and, perhaps dominating these, we encounter here security apparatuses working to disable bad circulation in order to foster good circulation, and are thus faced with an instance of the circulatory distribution of the sensible.<sup>72</sup>

By pointing to the way in which apparatuses of security instrumentalise law—typically the means of the sovereign model of power—this example draws attention to yet another aspect of the post-democratic order, one that further obstructs

67. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

69. Don Mitchell, “The Annihilation of Space by Law: The Roots and Implications of Anti-homeless Laws in the United States”, *Antipode*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1997), p. 304; original emphasis.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 305.

71. *Ibid.*

72. Consider, in particular, the passages describing the construction of beggars and other homeless people as impediments to the sufficient extent of consumption: “There is another, perhaps more important, danger posed by those sitting and lying on streets: ‘many people see those sitting or lying on the sidewalk and—either because they expect to be solicited or otherwise feel apprehensive—avoid the area. This deters them from shopping at adjacent businesses, contributing to the failure of some and damaging others, costing Seattle jobs and essential tax revenue’” (*ibid.*, p. 309).



the occurrence of politics: the factualisation of law.<sup>73</sup> This phenomenon, complementing the constant reference to the objective necessities deriving from the imperative of circulation, serves as the juridical legitimisation of the “modest state”. On the one hand, it refers to the “mimesis of the political practice of litigation” consisting in the minimal government’s self-imposition to constitutional control.<sup>74</sup> On the other hand, it implies the equalisation of law and fact in service of circulation.<sup>75</sup> As we will see in the next section, this collision has a significant role in the contemporary management of superfluity.

### Superfluous and Uncounted

Arriving finally at the question of resistance, in this section I look at struggles in and around a kind of space that seems to be paradigmatic of our present—possibly more so than the Camp.<sup>76</sup> Generally subject to similar mechanisms of power to those traced in the example of the anti-homeless laws but present on a much larger scale, this sort of space is the shantytown, the *favelas*, the *gecekondu*:<sup>77</sup> located for the most part on the peripheries of mostly “Third World” metropolises and populated by millions of people who cannot afford other forms of accommodation. As I would like to show below, present-day shantytowns that are supposed to be effaced from spectacular visions of urban development might also be paradoxical places when, eventually bouncing into visibility, they are able to disrupt the distribution of the sensible that constructs them as spaces of abandonment. While this claim implies that shantytowns can be seen as *the* political spaces of our present, clearly nothing would be more dissonant with whatever Rancière says about politics than to argue so. Therefore, in what follows, I focus on the particular movement of the South African Abahlali baseMjondolo,<sup>78</sup> for, on occasions, their struggle appears to be able to disrupt the dynamics of biopolitical abandonment and so is able to guide a potential conceptualisation of resistance thereto.<sup>79</sup>

As my point of departure I take the distinction between the population and the people, which Foucault, drawing on Louis-Paul Abeille, introduces when discussing the event of scarcity as touched upon above. According to Abeille, scarcity can

73. Deranty draws a parallel between Rancière’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s diagnoses of the phenomenon and refers to it by Nancy’s term: “the juridification of the social”; see Deranty, “Rancière’s Political Ontology”, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

74. Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

75. The collision of fact and law that Rancière discusses should not be confused with their indistinction theorised by Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, *op. cit.* (e.g. p. 170). Cf. Rancière, *ibid.*, p. 112; *idem*, “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?”, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 103, Nos. 2–3 (2004), pp. 297–310.

76. The Camp is the “biopolitical paradigm of the modern”, according to Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, *op. cit.* (e.g. pp. 9, 123).

77. These are the Brazilian and Turkish words, respectively, for shantytowns. The latter phrase means “it happened at night”. “For years, Turkey’s squatters built at night to take advantage of an ancient legal precept that said, essentially, that if they started construction at dusk and were moved in by sunrise without being discovered by the authorities, they gained legal standing and could not be evicted without a court fight” (Robert Neuwirth, *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 8.

78. Literally: “the people who live in the shacks”.

79. Beyond available texts of the movement (mostly online at <[www.abahlali.org](http://www.abahlali.org)>), I draw on field research carried out with the movement. At the time of writing the research is still ongoing, and the conclusions, therefore, should be regarded as preliminary.

be the chimera it has to be only if “people conduct themselves properly” and so “really act as members of the population”.<sup>80</sup> Those, on the other hand, who refuse to conduct themselves properly and disrupt the desirable development of the dynamics of scarcity, consequently even risking revolution, place themselves outside of the population and thus belong to another category: the people—hence the epigraph of this paper.<sup>81</sup> The significance of this distinction lies in its allusion to Rancière’s understanding of politics and the people (or, alternatively, the *demos*), as these conceptions posit disruption as essentially political. While not every disruption of the conduct of conduct should be read as at once political,<sup>82</sup> when it is associated with the subjectification of the “people” through processing a fundamental miscount, indeed we encounter politics.

Arguably, the Abahlali’s struggle presents such a case. Their resistance is almost fully condensed in this statement: “We are the people who do not count”—as it is primarily by rejecting-through-assuming the status of superfluity that the South African shack-dwellers’ movement emerges as a political subject.<sup>83</sup> A political subject conscious of the disruptive effect of presuming equality: “If you want to unite and to make a culture that people should be equal then you are invading the space that is forbidden to you, you are threatening the system.”<sup>84</sup> The shack-dwellers’ persistent invasion of this forbidden space started with a real invasion: a spontaneous road blockade in Durban in early 2005 as a reaction to rumours about the eThekweni (Metropolitan Durban) Municipality selling to a brick factory a piece of land that was promised to the dwellers of the Clare Estate settlement a few weeks earlier.<sup>85</sup> It was this event, fuelled by anger and the feeling of betrayal due to the Municipality’s neglect of the agreement that created the community. “The movement grew out of a spontaneous blockade, of our radical anger and frustration. It was not preceded by intellectual work, but afterwards the movement was formed because we realized that we are not on our own.”<sup>86</sup> So emerged the “politics of the poor”, or, as it is more often referred to, the “living politics”.

In turn, living politics rooted in this process of political subjectification and the notion of life it revolves around renders the Abahlali’s struggle able to disturb the processes of biopolitical abandonment.<sup>87</sup> Abahlali contest the forced mobility of

80. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

82. Here again Zanotti’s and Best’s (*op. cit.*) arguments can be relevant.

83. S’bu Zikode, “Opening Remarks at the Meeting to Build Consensus in Support of Participatory Upgrades in Cities and against Forced Removals to Rural Dumping Grounds”, available: <<http://abahlali.org/node/3627>> (accessed 22 June 2009).

84. Richard Pithouse, “To Resist all Degradations and Divisions—An Interview with S’bu Zikode”, *Pambazuka News* (30 April 2009), available: <<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/comment/55955>> (accessed 22 June 2009).

85. Cf. *idem*, “Struggle is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers’ Movement in Durban, South Africa”, *Monthly Review*, Vol. 57, No. 9 (2005), available: <<http://www.monthlyreview.org/0206pithouse.htm>> (accessed 22 June 2009).

86. S’bu Zikode, author’s notes, 6 May 2009. On the subjectifying force of anger see Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 130: “[Political] disappointment provokes an experience of injustice and the feeling of anger. I think anger is very important, and, contrary to the classical tradition, in Seneca say, I think it is the first political emotion. It is often anger that moves the subject to action.”

87. The most evident manifestation of these processes in present-day South Africa—recalling what was said above about the correlation of the prevalence of the circulative imperative and the

superfluous life by presenting biopolitics with a life heterogeneous to it; by fissuring the homogeneity of species being. It does so primarily through challenging an element central to governing the life of the population: the messianic spatio-temporality of development. To the effects that the circulatory dynamics of development take on the non-pertinent level that incidentally is populated by the shack-dwellers—effects that literally disallow their lives<sup>88</sup>—living politics opposes a manifold insistence on proximity. The appropriation of the idea of *in situ* upgrade—a policy that has been propagated by the UN-Habitat in recent years—for instance, reflects well the motives of this insistence.<sup>89</sup> Relocation to distant housing areas in the unforeseeable future, the no-place of eviction and the no-time of “informality” are opposed to the here-and-now in the demand of developing existing settlements.

This opposition is further reinforced by the insistence on equality and singularity. Both can be reflected through the role of understanding (the ability and the fundamental willingness to understand) within living politics. Understanding is at once the form and the content of living politics—indivisibly rooted in and reaffirming the basic presumption of every human being’s equality. On the one hand, one of the most important principles of living politics is that everyone must understand it. With a view to the Abahlali’s emphasis on everyone’s capability to think and to comprehend, clearly this imperative should not be read as a patronising intention to keep the slogans accessible for an ignorant mass. Quite the contrary: it reflects an ability to understand that rests on a fundamental presumption of equality: “we are all human beings, and so our needs are all, one way or another, similar”.<sup>90</sup> Crucially, as the parallel with Rancière’s interpretation of Joseph Jacotot’s conception of the equality of intellect shows,<sup>91</sup> so conceiving of the capability to understand defies another aspect of the developmental temporality by eliminating the need for explanation:

I explain an idea to someone because I suppose that he wouldn’t understand it if I didn’t explain it to him [. . .] Rather than eliminating incapacity, explanation, in fact, creates it. It does this in part by establishing the

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factualisation of law—is the series of attempts to change the legislative regulation regarding shack settlements and illegal land occupation. Neutralising the pro-poor elements of earlier legislation, among them the Constitution that famously endorses a wide array of social and economic rights, it now seems that the official state policy towards shack-dwellers—regardless of a growing backlog in the number of low-cost houses built and the number of people entitled to them—is eviction. See, for example, Marie Huchezermeyer, “Comment on KwaZulu-Natal Elimination and Prevention of Reemergence of Slums Bill”, in Marie Huchezermeyer and Aly Karam (eds.), *Informal Settlements: A Perpetual Challenge?* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2006); Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), *Business as Usual? Housing Rights and Slum Eradication in Durban, South Africa* (Geneva: COHRE, 2008), available: <[http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/081007%20Business%20as%20Usual\\_final.print.pdf](http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/081007%20Business%20as%20Usual_final.print.pdf)> (accessed 22 June 2009), pp. 61, 104.

88. One of the greatest threats is fire: in lacking electricity, people use candles and paraffin stoves, which can cause huge fires in minutes, as the shacks are built mostly of flammable material—and are built very close to each other. In lacking water, too, a candle flipping over can lead to disasters. Cf. Matt Birkinshaw, *A Big Devil in the Jondolos: The Politics of Shack Fires* (Durban: Abahlali baseMjondolo 2008), available: <<http://abahlali.org/node/4013>> (accessed 22 June 2009).

89. See, for example, the UN-Habitat’s Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme at <<http://www.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=592>> (accessed 22 June 2009).

90. Zikode, quoted in Pithouse, “To Resist all Degradations and Divisions”, *op. cit.*

91. See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

temporal structure of delay (“a little further along,” “a little later,” “a few more explanations and you’ll see the light”) that, writ large, would become the whole nineteenth century myth of Progress: “the pedagogical fiction erected into the fiction of the whole society,” and the general infantilisation of the individuals who compose it.<sup>92</sup>

Singularity, on the other hand, is inherent in living politics’ insistence on the willingness to understand: as one of its most important functions, living politics provides a space for everyone’s narrative of his or her individual suffering and, in turn, it is exactly these narratives that give it its content.<sup>93</sup> Thus, these narratives of pain and injustice trigger the enactment of *dissensus*. In light of this, as Rancière argues, the separation of the political sphere from the sphere of life necessities makes no sense indeed.<sup>94</sup>

To be sure, the above sketch of Abahlali baseMjondolo’s struggle is only the first step in the process of understanding it. In the context of the discussion in this article, however, I did not aim to do more. What this section was intended to point to through outlining the main facets of the South African shack-dwellers’ politics is the possibility to think resistance to biopolitical abandonment as it has been conceptualised in the preceding sections. The living politics of Abahlali bears this possibility because through its political subjectification stemming from the presumption of equality and the singularity of human life, apparently, it is able to forge the caesura between the pertinent and the non-pertinent levels of governance posited by modern governmental rationality and is thus able to challenge both the perspectival and the political superfluity inscribed into it. For this, at least, in a world where processes of economic and social marginalisation materialise superfluity to an unprecedented degree, much is to be learned from its struggles.

## Conclusion

Starting from the puzzle posed by the ultimate aim of modern governmental rationality, that is, the nurturing of the population and its tendencies to exclude large parts of the same population from the spectrum of its care, this paper argues that abandonment is always already inscribed into this rationality. In contradiction to Agamben, inscribed abandonment is not attributed to sovereign power and its original activity of producing bare life, but is traced back to typically modern processes of transforming the political as problematised by Arendt and Foucault. Complementing these two thinkers’ work with those of Hacking and Rancière, it is argued that due to the naturalisation of the political that occurred with the construction of economy as an autonomous field and the forms of knowledge correlative to this construction, and culminating in what is referred to as the literalisation of the count, contingency and plurality of human action has been eliminated from governmental reason. This elimination of contingency, it is claimed, can be understood as the biopolitical abandonment inscribed into modern governmental rationality and, therefore, can be seen as enabling the biopower to disallow life.

92. Kristin Ross, “Rancière and the Practice of Equality”, *Social Text*, Vol. 29 (1991), p. 67.

93. S’bu Zikode, author’s interview, 2 June 2009.

94. Rancière, “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?”, *op. cit.*

The aim of conceptualising biopolitical abandonment by drawing on the Arendtian notion of superfluity is to enable an understanding of contemporary forms of extreme social and economic marginalisation and potential forms of resistance to these. Based on the endorsement of Rancière's aesthetic understanding of politics that centres on the notion of the distribution of the sensible, grasping the dynamics of biopolitical abandonment as spatio-temporal articulations is suggested. Still in line with Rancière's thought—which posits politics as the disruption of hierarchical orders of the sensible—and based on a discussion of the South African shack-dwellers' struggle, it is argued that the dynamics of biopolitical abandonment can eventually be diverted—despite the tendency within (global) neoliberal governance to equalise law and fact, so working towards impeding the political subjectification of those who have no part.

Foucault<sup>95</sup> famously claimed that power relations have to be subject to an ascending analysis and that resistance is a diagnostic of power. On the one hand, this implies that the close-up study of specific movements such as the Abahlali baseMjondolo potentially sheds light on the larger dynamics of global neoliberal governance. On the other hand, but still tied to studying instances of political resistance, this claim possibly guides an alternative way of conceptualising communities of our present. As this paper intended to show in contradiction to recent criticisms of the "biopolitical approach",<sup>96</sup> by providing a perspective from which to look at practices and rationalities of power at points where they crystallise and where they are contested, Foucault's thought does serve as a point of departure for thinking the political today. Although it might not suffice in itself to think contemporary forms of political resistance, complemented with an approach to politics as disrupting spatio-temporal orders defined by governmental rationalities, Foucault's concept of biopolitics forcefully grounds criticisms of what is thought to be given. Taking this criticism further through Rancière's understanding of the political as a singular event of resisting the givenness of a place, the *demos* might be found where one would never look for it.

95. See Foucault, "Society Must be Defended", *op. cit.*, p. 30 and *Idem*, "Subject and Power", *op. cit.*, p. 780.

96. See, e.g., David Chandler, "Critiquing Liberal Cosmopolitanism? The Limits of the Biopolitical Approach", *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), pp. 53–70; and Jan Selby, "Engaging Foucault: Discourse, Liberal Governance, and the Limits of Foucauldian IR", *International Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2007), pp. 324–345.