

Posthuman Bioracism, Or, Capitalism's Orthodox Humanity and Power

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For some, the discourse on “posthumanism” is inherently egalitarian since, by eliminating the age-old privilege of humans over other forms of life and machines, it finally realizes the democratic ideal of equality for all. I would rather argue that in its attempt to overcome such ostensible divisions as the one between human and non-human, the discourse on posthumanism fails to notice another more overarching, profound, and pernicious mode of discrimination, which is imposed by the very conditions of possibility of posthumanity itself, namely, the economy, epistemology, and ontology of secular capitalist modernity. To do so I invite us to heed to the posthuman in some of the most orthodox texts since the seventeenth century, notably Baruch Spinoza, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault. What I shall propose is that the posthuman condition is part of the orthodoxy of secular capitalist modernity, accompanying it since its inception, and that this insight bears important consequences in understanding the mechanisms of modernity's orthodox form of political power, namely, biopolitics.

If today we speak of the posthuman condition, in which humans are living organisms with intra-species biological and machinic components, it is because in the capitalist mode of production humans become inseparable from the means and the products of production,¹ which, as we know by now, range from plants and animals to machines and biogenetically produced life, to information, language, and affects. When Jacques Lacan says that “man thinks with his object,” we must take him literally—man thinks with his product.² Karl Marx spells out more clearly Lacan's point in his notorious, yet not by necessity adequately heeded theory of commodity fetishism. The radically new and, as Marx calls it, “mysterious” “character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity,” lies in “the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as *objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.*”³ It is for this reason that, as Alexandre Kojève put it, the laborer “contemplates himself when he contemplates [his product].”⁴ And it is for this same reason that not only humans are cyborgs, but also presumed non-humans have, to repeat Marx's words, “socio-natural properties.” In short, commodity fetishism means that in a commodified world there are no humans as opposed to products, but human-products or product-humans—in one word, commodities.

Thus, I now return to my initial point—the presumed “egalitarianism” entailed in the concept of posthumanity—to rephrase it as the question: *What is the posthuman criterion of discrimination imposed on commodities by capitalism as the condition of possibility of posthumanity?* Evidently, being posthuman, this criterion of discrimination must by definition apply, without any discrimination, to all commodities, beyond and above all ostensible distinctions (human-non-human, and the like).

Nevertheless, if discrimination has to retain its force as a concept, we must keep in mind that its ultimate signification is what Michel Foucault calls “the break into the domain of life...between what must live and what must die.”⁵ “From the seventeenth century onward,” that is, since the inception of capitalism, this break manifests itself, Foucault continues, as a

world picture 12 (winter 2017)

“racial war.”⁶ To this he adds, however, that “racism” is a “permanent struggle” that can assume different “transcriptions,” such as, already in the seventeenth century, its “first—*biological*—transcription,” or, in “the nineteenth century,” its “second transcription” as “class struggle.”⁷ Whatever its transcription—which will eventually become our central focus—the point remains, still in Foucault’s words, that racism is:

the discourse of a battle that has to be waged not between races, but by *a* race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm...or pose a threat [to it].⁸

More specifically, Foucault continues, racism is “a binary rift within society...the *splitting of a single race into a superrace and a subrace*.... *It is the reappearance, within a single race, of the past of that race.*”⁹

Now I can paraphrase my question: *What is the criterion and specific transcription of posthuman racism?* Or: *What is the specific form of struggle that splits the race of commodities into a superrace and a subrace?*

To approach this question we have to turn to the ontology of the commodity itself. Every commodity, Marx tells us, is a use-value or object of utility, and an exchange-value, the equivalent value required in order to exchange the object of utility for another. Regarding the commodity’s use-value, Marx differentiates between two kinds. On the one hand, there is the use-value of those commodities capable of labor—*labor-power*—and, on the other hand, there is the use-value of all other commodities—a specific use, such as the use of a coat or a shoe. Crucially, labor-power, Marx continues, “is not materialized in a product, does not exist apart from...[the laborer] at all, thus exists not really, but only in potentiality.”¹⁰ In Paolo Virno’s incisive commentary, labor-power designates not “labor services actually executed” but “the generic ability to work,” and as such, “[l]abor-power incarnates (literally) a fundamental category of philosophical thought: specifically, the potential,” *the power of labor to actualize itself*. And this power of self-actualization which, as such, is “*not present*,” “becomes, with capitalism, an exceptionally important commodity,” so that, “instead of remaining an abstract concept”—or, a purely philosophical category, as in Spinoza’s definition of substance as precisely the power of self-actualization—“takes on a pragmatic, empirical, socioeconomic dimension.” This is the very reason why today we speak of biopolitics. For, “where something which exists only as *possibility* is bought and sold, this something is not separable from the living body of the worker” which “is the substratum of that labor-power which, in itself, has no existence.”¹¹ The body and life understood as “pure and simple *bios*, acquires a specific importance in as much as it is the tabernacle...of mere potential.”¹² The inclusion of bios into politics, as Virno remarks, “is merely an effect...of that primary fact—both historical and philosophical—...of the commerce of potential as potential,” that is, of the commodification of the potential.¹³ In other words, to the various prostheses to the human that constitute the posthuman we must add, beyond anything actual, *the potential*.

So far, we can conclude that biopolitics concerns indeed bios, but by this is meant, *pace* Foucault, not “the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy,”

etc.¹⁴ Rather, the object of biopolitics is the body *qua potentiality*, insofar as, in the form of *labor-power*, it obtains an *empirical, socioeconomic dimension*.

Now, to be potentiality or the power of self-actualization means to be *sub species aeternitatis*—under the species of eternity. The potential does not pertain to time, nor is it subject to change, since it is itself permanent change, and in Gilles Deleuze’s words, “the form of change does not change.”¹⁵ We could say that the potential is unchangeable difference, meaning the “eternal recurrence” of the possibility of the virtual to become actual, without this difference between the two poles, the virtual and the actual, ever changing into anything else. This means that in its dimension as potentiality, the body—so far, the body of only those commodities capable of labor—exists beyond and above the issues of decay or mortality.

Thus, we arrive at a further conclusion: the object of biopolitics is the body *qua potentiality*, that is, not the administration of life as to its biological or *machinic* functions, but the administration of the *body’s relation to its mortality or immortality, to time or eternity*, to its dimension as, on the one hand, a machinic-biologico-informational aggregate within time, and, on the other hand, as potentiality under the species of eternity.

Moreover, to say that bios is potentiality or the power of self-actualization amounts to saying that the body is *self-referential*. We find one of the best articulations of this point in Jean-Paul Sartre’s phenomenological ontology. There he writes:

*The body...is...the point of view on which I can no longer take a point of view. This is why at the top of that hill which I call a “good viewpoint,” I take a point of view at the very instant when I look at the valley, and this point of view on the point of view is my body.*¹⁶

This is why “I can not take a point of view on my body without a *reference to infinity*,” that is, to the fact that the body as “a point of view supposes a double relation: a relation with the things *on which the body is* a point of view and a relation with the observer *for whom the body is* a point of view.”¹⁷ The body is this self-referentiality between the *things* that appear under its gaze and the *bearer* of the gaze or the *agent* for whom they appear. The body is an agent-thing or a thing-agent—by which is meant that it is neither of two but the eternally immutable relation between the two, which is the potentiality of actualizing both at the same time, and which remains potentiality precisely because of its reference to infinity, of the fact that *there is no limit, no ultimate, transcendent gaze that could cease* the eternal self-referentiality of the body to itself.

Conversely, all this also means that if such a transcendent gaze were somehow to emerge, the body would cease to be a self-referential potentiality, it would be actualized as a thing in time, and, hence, as a perishable or mortal thing. But before we proceed to see what such a scenario would entail, let us turn to the other commodities that are not capable of labor.

Their fate, too, depends entirely on the existence or not of a limit. It was Aristotle who first made this observation, by comparing *oikonomia* or “household-management”—the practice of exchange dominant at his time—to *chrematistics*—the trade for the purpose of acquiring profit or interest, that is, an intimation of capitalism as still an aberrant or “unnatural”

practice. In the case of *oikonomia*, the end or purpose of the exchange is defined, Aristotle writes, “by the proper use of the article in question,” which is always limited, such as the use of a “shoe” which is to “put [it] on your foot.”¹⁸ But the same shoe can also be used “to offer in exchange,” and “[b]oth,” Aristotle admits, “are uses of the shoe” but the latter is “not the use proper to it, for a shoe is not expressly made for purposes of exchange.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, this act of exchange can remain within the limits of what belongs to “nature” (*oikonomia*), as long as it is “carried on far enough to satisfy the needs of the parties” involved in the exchange, unlike the “form of money-making,” *chrematistics*, which is not part of nature because it is concerned with “how the greatest profits might be made out of the exchanges,” and “there is indeed no limit to the amount of riches to be got from this mode” of exchange.²⁰ Chrematistics, Aristotle concludes, is unnatural because “there is no limit to the end which this kind of acquisition has in view,” whereas “household-management [*oikonomia*], on the other hand, does have a limit,” and is therefore natural.²¹ Marx fully concurs with Aristotle on chrematistics, stating that the “circulation of money as capital is an end in itself,” and that the “circulation of capital is therefore limitless.”²²

The reason why Aristotle abhors the limitless exchange that is, by definition, an end of itself is that its consequences go far beyond economy, at least in the narrow sense of the term. For its establishment as the dominant mode of exchange would entail the collapse of the basic Aristotelian premise—*entelechy*—which, through its itinerary across countries on all sides of the Mediterranean, survived antiquity as also the cornerstone of the variants of monotheism. Entelechy is the idea that everything bears in itself its own *telos*. More specifically, entelechy postulates, in Aristotle’s words, that “the *means* towards the end are not unlimited” because “the end itself [is] setting the limit in each case,” or, in other words, that everything has its specific *limited telos*, of which it is the means, and the means cannot coincide with the end.²³ The limitless movement of capital as self-valorizing value (i.e., value that accrues more value) defies this principle of entelechy wholesale, for it is not just value that becomes its own end, but that everything else becomes exchange-value, serving nothing other than this same unlimited end of value to valorize itself, and is thus deprived of any possible entelechy as a distinct thing. If there remains any entelechy in capitalism, this is the exclusive *telos* of value, whereby the sole proper use of the shoe—as of any commodity, capable or not of labor—becomes to exchange it for the sake of accruing ever more value.

But, by losing its specific entelechy and becoming a value in a limitless movement, the shoe refers itself to infinity, and is thus relegated to the realm of self-referentiality and eternity. This shoe cannot wear out. To claim that the shoe is anything but self-valorizing value and that it has some other *telos* of its own would amount to a sacrilege of the whole condition of posthumanity—its inviolable principle of potentiality and self-referentiality.

As it turns out, whether capable of labor or not, the commodity, and along with it the posthuman condition, is determined by its ontological status as potentiality. The invocation of a *telos* other than limitless self-referentiality is tantamount to the invocation of an *ultimate transcendent gaze*, insofar as both undermine the body as potentiality. This is why today the invocation of *any spirit*—historical or religious—*other* than the Spirit of Capitalism, is perceived as *both* threatening *and* inferior. Why “threatening” is evident, since any transcendent gaze confers the fatal blow on the body that renders it mortal. Why it is simultaneously also inferior is something that the expert on the Spirit of Capitalism, Max Weber, had already noted. Having shown that the spirit of capitalism was “born...from the

spirit of *Christian* asceticism,” Weber’s argument culminates in the thesis that its “essential elements” consist in “the content of the Puritan *worldly* asceticism...*without the religious basis*,” an “asceticism...*stripped of its religious and ethical meaning*.”²⁴ In fact, those who did not succeed in severing themselves from their religious calling and in subscribing instead to the “professional calling,” according to which “labour must...be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself” and the sole “wish [is] to earn more and more money”—those people represented “*traditionalism*,” that is, the “most important opponent with which the spirit of capitalism...had to struggle.”²⁵ For this reason, Weber concludes, “it might well be truly said” about those who live in “the last stage of this cultural development,” that they are “*specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart*,” but the fact remains that “*this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved*.”²⁶ Thus, the race of commodities finds itself split between itself and its “traditionalist” past, between the superrace of those guided by the spiritless spirit of capital, and the subrace of those still guided by a spirit not “stripped of *religious* and *ethical* meaning.” The superrace feels entitled to set the norm and to defend itself against its at once inferior and threatening subrace. Or, more accurately, the superbiorace sets potentiality as the norm, and defends itself against its own past, that is, the subbiorace that, by proposing any religio-ethical meaning, animates a transcendent gaze that is at once inferior and threatening to potentiality.

Foucault was right to argue that “racism...is...inscribed in the workings of all...modern States,” insofar as they are biopolitical states. And by this he rightly meant “not a truly ethnic racism,” *but*—and this was his limitation—a “racism of the evolutionist kind, biological racism,” according to which “killing or the imperative to kill is acceptable only if it results...in the elimination of the biological threat to and the improvement of the species or race.”²⁷ I hope to have shown that the object of biopolitics is not the biological body but the bios as potentiality, and that this means that the *posthuman transcription* of the “permanent struggle” is *bioracial*—the break within the domain of life between what can live and what must die according to an—of course, imaginary and utterly secularist and capitalist—division between mortality and immortality. What for some years now is being called the “war against terrorism” is in truth a war against *our own mortality*. Tomorrow this split may bear the name of another war. But, whatever its label, in a bioracial struggle the ever-reconstitutable assemblage of bio-immortals is doomed to assault, with escalating impunity, the ever-shifting group of bio-mortals. For the latter, whoever they happen to be, will increasingly be considered, as in all racisms, inferior forms of life, which in this case means: *not posthuman*—not animals, machines, or oncogenes, but, what is perhaps worse, just humans.

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Notes

¹ My position here deviates to some extent from Étienne Balibar's reading of Marx's relation among the components of the labor process in industrial or machinized production. The "labour process" in general consists of (1) the "personal activity" of "labour"; (2) the "object of labour"; and (3) the "means of labour" (Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, [London: Verso, 2009], 270-271). The difference between the eras of handicraft (and manufacturing) and industrial production consists in a transformation of the form in which the three elements of labor combine. Handicrafts rely on a "*technique*" as "*the indissoluble ensemble of a means of labour or tool, and a worker, moulded to its use by apprenticeship and habit,*" just as the tool must itself "be adapted to the human organism" (267). With the introduction of the industrial "machine-tool" this "relationship is inverted," so that the human "organism must adapt itself to the instrument" (268). From this Balibar infers that the "machine-tool makes the organization of production completely independent of the characteristics of human labour-power: at the same stroke, the means of the labour and the labourer are completely separated and acquire different forms of development" (268). But if the laborer's organism must adapt itself to the instrument, then what takes place here is not a separation between labor and means of labor but rather the subjugation of the former by the latter. Thus, the elements constituting machinic production are indeed restructured around "*the unity of the means...and the object of labour,*" under which the labor activity (and the laborer) is entirely subordinated—rather than being simply separated (268). It is because this total subordination of the labor to the means of labor eliminates the individual character of the laborer's "technique" that a unit of production no longer consists of a particular group of specialized laborers but is rather a "material skeleton independent of the labourers themselves" (*Capital, Vol. 1*), a "set of fixed machines ready to receive any workers" (268).

² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 62.

³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 164-5.

⁴ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, assembled by Raymond Queneau, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. by James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 25.

⁵ Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-6*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 254.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books and *New Left Review*, 1993), 267.

¹¹ Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 139.

¹⁵ Giles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 89.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, Pocket Books, 1956), 433.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 433-4.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair, revised Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 81; 1256b40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 81-2; 1256b40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 82-3 and 84; 1256b40 and 1257b10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 84; 1257b25.

²² Karl Marx, 1990, 253.

²³ Aristotle, 1992, 84; 1257b25.

²⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Dover, 1958), 180-2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58-62 and 180.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 181-2.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, 2003, 256 and 260-2.