When Freud Met Foucault, Or: Freud as A Theorist of Population Politics

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"[T]he power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual's continued existence."
—Michel Foucault[1]

"One cell helps to preserve the life of the others, and the confederation of cells can live on even if individual cells must die."
—Sigmund Freud[2]

0: Introduction

In this paper, I want to make the argument that Freud's metapsychology—specifically, the metapsychology of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the 'lost' 12th manuscript—*implicitly* contains a theory of population politics while *explicitly* portending Foucault's account of the dark underside of biopolitics. While on first blush, placing Freud next to Foucault seems odd, it is my ultimate contention that despite the obvious differences between the two thinkers, both share a fundamentally similar view of the politics of populations. Indeed, Freud's speculative biologies put forth in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the unfinished 12th metapsychological manuscript, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, provide preliminary (and provisional) conceptions of population dynamics that prefigure Foucault's account(s). Thus, this paper will follow a two-step, the first movement (briefly) examining Foucault while the second dives headfirst into Freudian speculation.

1: A Brief Jaunt with Foucault

Let me start with a brief recapitulation of Foucault's account of population politics in Volume One of *The History of Sexuality* and *Security, Territory, Population*. As is well-known, according to Foucault's account, what he describes as historical shifts in the operations of power—shifts from spectacular violence to conditional sovereign power to juridical power to disciplinary power to biopower—involved concomitant shifts in how the population as body politic was viewed, exemplified by a general shift from an excess mass that could be disposed of with wanton abandon, to a cultivated group not merely to be managed for the sake of some higher end, but rather to be *known, consisting of those whose lives were to be promoted*. Indeed, where the body politic was, under a conditional state of power, standing reserve for the sovereign

[1] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 (The Will to Knowledge)*, trans., Robert Hurley (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1998): 137.
[2] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed., Todd Dufresne, trans., Gregory Richter (Peterborough, CA: Broadview, 2011), 87 [*Standard Edition* pagination in hard brackets; *S.E. 18*: 50].

in whose name, honor, and defense it could be mobilized and, in turn, *exposed* to the forces of life and death, under a calcified classical age of calculation, the body politic turned into an amalgamated whole to be *organi*zed and controlled in a *régime* of securitization. The body politic ceased to be a pool of individuals to be disposed of in the name of the sovereign, instead it became an object on which power worked to ensure the continued existence of life—at least insofar as it was expedient—through securitizing efforts.

Crucially, however, population security is predicated upon a specific relationship to knowledge: a relationship that is positively operative within a dialectic of knowability and unknowability. On the one hand, security is, "at bottom, […] the problem of the series"—how many bodies are moving through a given town on a given day, what percentage of those bodies are infected with a given pathogen, etc.—and as such, is a problem to be tackled within the domain of statistical inference.[3] On the other hand, however, security is predicated on a system of *laissez-faire* and, in turn, acceptance of uncertainty. To be sure, uncertainty is not a desirable state of affairs, but contra the utopian aspirations of 'physiocrats' of earlier eras, the contingency of the world was an accepted given within which politics had to operate. For Foucault, the goal of an apparatus of security is "to respond to a reality in such a way that this response cancels out the reality to which it responds."[4] To wit, instead of aiming at the creation of a reality, securitization is a reactive tendency that seeks to *temporarily stabilize intrinsically unstable systems.* Thus, the key problematic for security is that of uncertainty recognized and instantiated through small, isolated outbreaks or eruptions of the unknown. Instead of, say, preventing a plague wholesale—a task that is, for Foucault, not only untenable but, *if it were even possible* would entail totalitarian measures—a society based on security will recognize that a) viral outbreaks are inevitable and b) such outbreaks can be predicted and/or are subject to different forms of knowledge/power production.[5] What is unique about this is while power is still nominally oriented towards the preservation and ordering of life (as is the biopolitical paradigm), here there are *acceptable losses* as it is recognized that not all can be saved; some must be exposed to the plague, either contingently or intentionally, and thus not all will survive. From this, one does not only get the implicit dark underside of a biopolitical paradigm—that of thanatopolitics—a dark underside that requires, as it were, an active means of killing (or at least 'exposing one's life'), but one gets a far more insidious—and passive—mode of violence: *letting die*. The goal of security *simultaneously* entails the acceptance of *certain degrees of insecurity*.

Ultimately, what's vital for this conception—and crucially important for Foucault's developing thought—is not merely that the death of others is actively necessary in order to secure the self, but the death of others (and in some cases, the death of the self) is an *inevitability of life itself. A politics that deals in life must necessarily and inevitably accept the insecurity of life. Small, manageable instances of death are what ensure life as such continues*.

[3] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, ed., Michel Senellart, trans., Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Picador, 2007), 20.
[4] Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 47.
[5] Ibid., 59.

2: A (Foucauldian) Return to Freud

Although Freud's views are at least as well-known as Foucault's, his metapsychological speculations, less so. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* remains a heterodox text, and *A Phylogenetic Fantasy* was only recently published. Thus, here is where the real work begins.

Engaging in "often far-fetched speculation," Freud, in section four of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, begins to examine the formation of consciousness first with recourse to a biological individual (re)acting to external stimuli, and then moves in subsequent sections to a discussion of how death informs—and indeed, ensures—life.[6] While Freud's discussion is originally oriented toward the individual organism, it is my contention that one can expand or extrapolate—perhaps even abstract—Freud's discussion to a *specific understanding* of populations. Thus, what I will attempt to do first is explicate Freud's speculative biology, noting areas of clear resonance with Foucault, while then positing that we can view the individual organism in Freud as a microcosm of larger population politics.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud's first analytical move is to compress a system down and look at "a living organism in its most simplified form," "an undifferentiated vesicle" that is acted upon directly by the outside world.[7] As per Freud's account, given bombardment and time, the 'outer shell' of the organism will die off—become calcified—and force the organism to be stimulated in a fundamentally different way as the organism itself becomes differentiated between crust and internal structure. Following the immediate stimulation of the protozoan *without* differentiation, "the unrelenting impact of external stimuli" becomes too much for the 'outer shell' to bear, ultimately causing it to become "burned through with stimulation," 'killing' it, and turning it into a mediator between Inside and Outside.[8] What's crucial within this discussion is a broad, ontological claim: not only does external excitation lead to differentiation, but the whole is not the sum of its parts. More accurately, the vesicle that ultimately becomes differentiated is composed of different parts that don't equal, but are rather *subordinated to*, the whole. Indeed, to save the organism from undue trauma, the crust becomes "a *shield against stimuli*," sacrificing its own existence—its 'not-burned-throughness'—for the sake of the larger organism.[9]

The significance of this should be obvious, but it's worth making it explicit: this initial formation of the crusty organism is analogous to—indeed, it's a microcosm of—population politics understood through a biopolitical lens. As Foucault's later formulation of biopolitics intermingled with securitization makes clear, for life itself not to thrive, but simply *exist*, death must be inexorably imbricated with the vital functions of the system; even 'perfect securitization' involves loss of life due not only to contingent factors, but the need to attain purity (what Foucault calls the politics of "sanguinity").[10] Where for Foucault, under a bio-security *régime* there are acceptable loses, for Freud there too are acceptable loses necessary to ensure the healthy functioning of the system. Under Foucault's analysis, there are, say, 100 bodies living in close proximity and in order for the whole to survive—*i.e.*, the birth of a next

[6] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 65 [24].
[7] Ibid., 67 [26].
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 68 [27].
[10] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 147.

generation—*at best*, some fraction of those bodies must simply die due any number of natural causes and, *at worst*, some fraction of those must *be made to die*. Regardless of the moral calculus or the play of sovereignty, the impact is the same: a portion of the population must die so the whole can survive. This logic is implicit in Freud's discussion of the primeval protozoan for whom a portion must die so that the whole can survive and becomes even clearer as he discusses the relationship between so-called 'life' and 'death drives.'

While a full discussion of life and death drives—and their relationship to each other—is a task best done elsewhere, we can simplistically understand them through a combined force I'll term 'thanatovitalism' or, a *tendency towards death* along a path that *temporarily preserves life*. We can understand the thanatovitalistic impulse with recourse to Freud's initial account of the death drive—an account that gets complicated as it goes through further iterations. Despite that, a simplistic reading of the death drive seems to situate Freud as saying that organisms seek to return to some prior state of being—namely death—but only 'want' to get there via their own, inbuilt path.[11] A particular organism, for example, has an innate 'desire' for death, but not to die accidentally or for reasons external to itself. Instead, it wants to "die only in its own way"—there is an inbuilt *telos* to the organism.[12] Given this, while tending toward death, the organism has within itself various drives toward temporary self-preservation; death that is not in-line with the organism's *telos* (what that looks like, Freud is unclear about) is delayed, averted, or stopped so that the organism can fulfill its goal. In this (admittedly crude) reading, there is a vitalism within Freud that is simultaneously, and *not* contradictorily, oriented towards death; a thanatovitalistic impulse. It is through this impulse that Freud explains the relationship between cells and the entities they make up. By situating cells as *parts in relation to a whole*, the larger organism as such becomes an analog for the body politic with each cell representative of an individual body within the socius. While each cell, as per Freud, has an inbuilt thanatovitalistic impulse to simultaneously preserve its life for the sake of its 'dying in its own way,' the organism as such, while also having such an impulse, overrides the concerns of individual cells inasmuch as the body of the organism as such is the fundamental structure against which specific parts are organized and conditioned. It is from here that Freud makes the explicit claim that the organism, while being an aggregate of cells, is a tool of vital extension: "[T]he union of numerous cells into a vital association, as in multicellular organisms, has become a means for extending their life."[13] While such a view implies a different level of agency to particular cells than is seemingly present in Freud's prior discussions, we mustn't miss the forest for the trees. Indeed, the vital point within Freud's comment is that *for the sake of the whole, individuals subordinate themselves*. Going further, Freud contends that not only are individuals subordinated to the whole inasmuch as they make it up, but they even give their lives for it, acting as living examples of the detoured path towards 'dying in one's own way.' Indeed, in a 'desire' to prolong the life of the whole—allowing it to 'die in its own way'—individual cells become expendable: "One cell helps to preserve the life of the others, and the confederation of cells can live on even if individual cells must die."[14] The language (at least in English) becomes more explicit: some cells "sacrifice themselves" in order to ensure the growth of the whole.[15]

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[11] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 77 [38].
[12] Ibid., 78 [39].
[13] Ibid., 87 [50].
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

Again, the parallels to Foucault are abundantly clear. The "multicellular organism" Freud discusses can, without too much of a leap, be read as, if not a microcosm of, then an analogy for a particular ordering of society insofar as the life of the whole is privileged above the lives of individuals. Referring back to Foucault, under a bio-security *régime*, the population as abstract yet controllable via knowledge/power production takes precedence over the individuals that make it up. Indeed, to be more specific, the *health* of the whole is not only contingent upon the survival of healthy individuals, but it is reliant upon the acceptance of the death of unhealthy individuals *for the sake of the whole*; some bodies simply can't be saved. Amongst the above crosscurrents we can find within quasi-psychoanalytic speculations on biology, precursors to Foucault's later explication(s) of biopolitics as such.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) is not the only text of Freud's that deals with implicitly biopolitical subjects, however. While one can likely draw out similar threads in other works, I want to look solely at the unfinished 12th metapsychological manuscript recently excavated by Ilse Grubrich-Simits from a trunk belonging to the Ferenczi estate: *A Phylogenetic Fantasy* (1915). The manuscript, arguably more speculative than *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, melds Lamarckian and Darwinian understandings of inheritance to argue that, amongst other things, primeval traumas in the pre-history of humanity had such a profound impact on the human species that our current *mélange* of neuroses "must also bear witness to the history of the mental development of mankind."[16] My main focus here, however, is to sketch Freud's account of human life post-Ice Age—and the role that specific humans had in 'civilization' at that time—and then, with a little speculation of my own (aided by the analyst in my head), note a few congruences with Foucauldian accounts of bio-security that are at once more explicitly political *and* anticipate later theorists of biopolitics.

For Freud in this text, "the development of primal human[s]," a development that deeply infected and influenced the overall 'trajectory' of human history, occurred "under the influence of the geological fate of the earth" and, in particular, "the Ice Age."[17] The privations imposed on humans by the "exigencies of the Ice Age" were crucial structuring factors for our development insofar as they changed our relationship to the external world.[18] According to Freud, humans became "generally *anxious*" due to the fact that the outside world, a world "hitherto predominantly friendly," became "a mass of threatening perils" and was rife with uncertainty.[19] As a result, humans had to develop not only psychological, but socio-political coping mechanisms. Clearly influenced by (but not citing) Malthus, Freud argues that with a climate of uncertainty and peril, there was a tension "between self-preservation and [the] desire to procreate."[20] Indeed, as if borrowing from the Englishman, Freud notes that in order for the whole of the social body to survive—"[f]ood was not sufficient to permit an increase in the human hordes" and there simply weren't the social safety nets required to "keep so many

[16] Sigmund Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neuroses*, ed., Ilse Grubrich-Simits, trans., Axel Hoffer and Peter Hoffer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 11.
[17] Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 13.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 14.
[20] Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 14.

helpless beings alive"—not only was it "a social obligation to limit reproduction," but some newborns were marked for extermination.[21]

The issue becomes explicitly Foucauldian: how did this obligation come about and how was it enforced? For Freud, the figure of the father, a figure whose oppression he poignantly notes "replaces the exigencies of the time," became all encompassing.[22] The father not only developed language—a tool to "investigate," "understand," and attempt to "secure […] mastery" over the outside world—but he simultaneously positioned himself as sovereign.[23] In order to "safeguard the lives of so many other helpless ones," the father not only exiled those who were a threat to him, but lifted himself above the law, giving himself "unrestrained dominance" over others in the group not to subjugate or kill them, but to *ensure their survival.*[24] Against threats that could not be predicted, much less controlled, "the primal father of the human horde" hedged humanity's bets and not only imposed rigid restrictions on sexuality, but in line with Foucault's characterization of the *laissez-faire régime* of (in)security, accepted manageable losses of individual lives for the sake of the social body as a whole.[25] Indeed, in a perverse recapitulation across time, Freud's account of the primal father's dominance is identical to Foucault's account of the unconditional power of the Roman father who exercised *patria potestas*—"the right to decide life and death" exemplified by maxim, 'I gave you life, I can take it away.'[26] It is with this understanding that we can see the primal father as a Hobbesian Leviathan imposing a state of exception over those whom he managed. Furthermore, in line with later theorists of biopolitics and the state of exception (especially Agamben and Mbembe), Freud contends that even after the temporary instability is overcome and some sense of 'normality' returns, the "oppression by the father" is continued "against the second generation," either explicitly as the state of exception becomes the norm or, more powerfully, as inbuilt systems of control.[27] It is this that causes Freud to say that "neurosis is therefore a cultural acquisition."[28] While there is significantly more that could be said about the formation of neuroses in Freud and the establishment of a norm in Foucault, I will only wink and nod in that direction, recognizing the work yet to come...

Indeed, while there is more to do linking Freud to Foucault—a path that winds, at the very least, through Malthus and Darwin—as well as drawing out the state of exception in *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, it has been my goal here to begin to bring forth this unlikely linkage between the two giants of Western thought.

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[21] Ibid., 14, 15.
[22] Ibid., 20.
[23] Ibid., 15.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 16.
[26] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 135.
[27] Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*, 19.
[28] Ibid.