

How to Make Sense of Precariousness? *Bíos-Precarious and Sensitive Life / Como produzir sentido a partir da precariedade? Bios-precário e vida sensível / ¿Cómo hacer sentido en la precariedad? Bíos-precario y vida sensible*

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ABSTRACT

The operation that we want to emphasize revolves around the problematic area that brings light to the critical work that uses cultural material and assumes a conceptual complementarity between the paths of biopolitics and precariousness. What these analyses and their work with materials clearly indicate is that a set of dimensions, lines of questioning and problematic zones are not given enough relevance in contemporary debates about biopolitics and precariousness. Therefore, there emerges the need to develop a conceptual tool that may account for markers that encode a precarious life. That is, precisely, the common blind spot and, at the same time, the space of conceptual intersection on which we focus: the biopolitical paths that have not been taken into account in the processes of precarization of life and, in equal measure, the theorization about the precarious condition that has not been developed in strictly biopolitical terms. We call this conceptual knot *bíos*-precarious. This concept stems from the confluence between Judith Butler's (theoretical) tools in relation to the bodily ontology of precariousness and the intersection between impersonal life and affirmative biopolitics in Roberto Esposito's biopolitical path.

KEYWORDS: *Bíos*-precarious; Biopolitics; Precariousness; Judith Butler; Roberto Esposito

RESUMO

A operação que nos interessa destacar gira em torno da zona de problematidade que ilumina o trabalho crítico com materiais culturais e que supõe uma complementaridade conceitual entre os caminhos da biopolítica e da precariedade. Aquilo que essas análises e seu trabalho com materiais indicam, de um modo muito nítido, é um conjunto de dimensões, linhas de indagação e zonas de problematização que não adquirem a suficiente relevância nos debates contemporâneos sobre biopolítica e precariedade. Daí advém a necessidade de elaborar uma ferramenta de trama conceitual que dê conta dos marcadores que codificam uma vida precária. Justamente, este é o ponto cego em comum e, ao mesmo tempo, o espaço de interseção conceitual que nos interessa: os percursos em biopolítica que não tenham considerado os processos de precarização da vida e, em igual medida, as teorizações sobre a condição precária que não tenham pensado em termos estritamente biopolíticos. Denominamos bios-precário

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a este nó conceitual a partir da conjunção entre a caixa de ferramentas (teóricas) de Judith Butler em relação à ontologia corporal da precariedade e ao cruzamento do percurso biopolítico de Roberto Esposito entre vida impessoal e biopolítica afirmativa. PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Bios-precário; Biopolítica; Precariedade; Judith Butler; Roberto Esposito

RESUMEN

La operación que nos interesa subrayar gira en torno a la zona de problematización que ilumina el trabajo crítico con materiales culturales y que supone una complementariedad conceptual entre los recorridos de la biopolítica y de la precariedad. Lo que estos análisis y su trabajo con materiales indican, de un modo muy nítido, es un conjunto de dimensiones, líneas de indagación y zonas de problematización que no adquieren la suficiente relevancia en los debates contemporáneos sobre biopolítica y sobre precariedad. De allí la necesidad de elaborar una herramienta de entramado conceptual que dé cuenta de los marcadores que codifican una vida precaria. Y justamente, ese es el punto ciego en común y a la vez, el espacio de intersección conceptual que nos interesa: los recorridos en biopolítica que no han considerado los procesos de precarización de la vida y en igual medida, las teorizaciones sobre la condición precaria que no han pensado en términos estrictamente biopolíticos. Denominamos bios-precario a este nudo conceptual a partir de la conjunción entre la caja de herramientas de Judith Butler en relación a la ontología corporal de la precariedad y el cruce en el recorrido biopolítico de Roberto Esposito entre vida impersonal y biopolítica afirmativa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Bios-Precario; Biopolítica; Precariedad; Judith Butler; Roberto Esposito

Mar Del Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina. July 2017. The local Health Secretary shares his view on “homeless people,” sparked by the death of “homeless” Sergio Fernández, and highlights a case of a woman that frequently sleeps in the streets. Speaking with radio journalists on the show *Not Gone with the Wind (Lo que el viento no se llevó)*, Secretary Gustavo Blanco states, “We’ve picked her up 17 times. Every time we leave her at the hospital she goes back. *Just like a dog*, she goes back to the place where she feels comfortable.” The Health Secretary quoted an old normative code, which has early positivist and hygienist reminiscences. He argued about a continuous effort to “take her away” to get her into the hospital. However, despite sanitary policies and the efforts made, she insists on “going back to her place because she feels comfortable there.”

Buenos Aires [Autonomous City], Argentina, September 2018. Journalist writer Carolina Koruk publishes an article in the *Para Tí Magazine*, titled *Tiempo de salario*

emocional; de qué se trata este nuevo beneficio laboral [Emotional Salary Time: What is This New Work Benefit about]. It shows a new trend in Europe with substantial repercussions: *the emotional salary*. Koruk comments on the research done by the *iOpener Institute for People & Performance* in England on happiness in the daily duties of workers and the emotional state that results in a strong commitment by the employees of their companies. In critical times, Koruk explains, many companies dive into extra expenses as a decisive element “so that employees can be happy, even when you do not pay them.” This way, the company stops workers from migrating to other companies. Attached to the flexible culture (where goal completion is above everything, and there is certain freedom regarding work time), this kind of salary aims at emotions and well-being, at appreciating each of the working people, listening to them to keep them motivated, and at work climate.

The ideas at the core of these scenes are biopolitics and precariousness. The events exposed above are images that allow a reflection on how public servants and journalists and in general societies mark hierarchical distinctions between lives to be protected, taken care of, with a future planned out and lives to abandon, sacrifice, or directly eliminate. This primary mark, which is at the main center of biopolitics and precarization processes, entails a series of incisions, gradients, and thresholds around which decisions are made about the humanity or non-humanity of individuals and groups. These images are inscribed on a line of inquiry about the conditions in which it is possible to learn about life, or about the specific power mechanisms through which life is produced, taken care of, or valued as differential. These gazes return a sharpened image, yet clearly self-evident, of a dynamic which aims towards life, a living being or the animate over the basis of a series of distinctions and oppositions – more or less stable – between life and no-life, being alive and not alive, or between a purely biological life (*zoé*) in comparison to a way of life (*bios*). Indeed, life and precariousness name a displacement of meanings, just as Gustavo Blanco, the Health Secretary, does when he refers to a field of concepts and practices that casts thought beyond the humane because he locates homeless to a frontier along with the wilderness and the animal world. In such a way, precariousness stages a reconfiguration of structural inequality associated with poverty and its inequity markers through the recurring inquiry about the species limits, about what is human and its edges.

In this context, a series of critical analysis and cultural studies that work based on aesthetic materials made in Latin America explore this life as an expansive field and a set of reading operations that mobilize meanings upon the visible and the sensitive, which are primarily defined by the biopolitics logic, but also by the precarization processes of the living. Such materials include works by Fermín Rodríguez (2010), Florencia Garramuño (2015), Gabriel Giorgi (2014), Ximena Briceño (2017) and many others.

The critical work of reading with cultural materials (RUCOVSKY, 2016; 2018a; 2018b; 2019a; 2019b) illuminates dimensions that we intend to highlight. The operation that we want to emphasize about this life supposes a conceptual complementarity between the paths of biopolitics and precariousness. What these analyses and their work with materials indicate is a set of dimensions, lines of inquiry, and areas of problematization that do not acquire enough relevance in contemporary debates about biopolitics and precariousness. Hence, there is the need to develop a tool for a conceptual framework that can account for these markers that encode a precarious life. And even further, this is, at the same time, the blind spot and space of conceptual intersection: the paths in biopolitics that have not yet considered the processes of precarization of life; and in the same vein, the theorizations about the precarious condition that have not been thought about in strictly biopolitical terms.

We call this conceptual knot bios-precarious. The *bios*-precarious concept arises from the conjunction between Judith Butler's toolbox in relation to the bodily ontology of precariousness, and its crossing with Roberto Esposito's biopolitical path between impersonal life and affirmative biopolitics. There are many points of divergence between Butler's and Esposito's ponderations indeed, but perhaps there are even more points of convergence. We want to highlight two operations with this remark, both of Butler's and Esposito's corporeal ontologies as well as their affirmative biopolitics, because they allow a delimitation for this precarious form of life and the relationships between *bios*, culture and politics surrounding the question about the present time: Up to which degree is the current time crossed by precariousness and biopolitics? Or in other terms: In which degree is the present time understood in terms of Judith Butler's and Roberto Espósito's conceptual remapping?

Thus, what guides the present inquiry is not an exegetic pursue around the work and thought of both Butler and Esposito (by their proper names) which would seek justice to the nominal reputation of these authors, but rather to aim at another procedure and toward another epistemological direction. The intent is to unfold the viewpoint – or even better – to locate this *bios*-precarious in a superimposed level, following a topologic and systematic procedure, that is, a nuance within the broader figure it intends to counter: What are the conditions of possibility of the precarized living, of the *bios*-precarious? How can we deal with these vectors and modulations, as well as the epochal dimension or of the historical present time which codifies a life?

1 Biopolitics is the Insurmountable Horizon of our Time

There are many things I can't tell you.
I'm not going to be autobiographical.
I want to be "bio."
I write as the words flow.
*Clarice Lispector*¹

Biopolitics is a heterogeneous research field. It has diffused limits and is in constant expansion. Biopolitics involves a broad set of studies and research lines that would be hard to put together on a single perspective. In an intuitive sense, the term seems to shed light to an imprecise constellation that revolves around the concept formed by *bios* (the nourishing life according to Aristotle, the body, or the living) and politics (power, government, institutions, laws, conflicts). According to the word's meaning, biopolitics refers to the politics that occupies itself with and takes care of life (in Greek *bíos politikós*). However, based on the distinction between *bíos* and *zoé*, biopolitics refers to men's qualified life (*bios*).²

Biopolitics, as a term, has been considered an *oxymoron* (a fusion of two concepts that contradict each other, because politics in a classical sense goes beyond the

¹ LOWE, E. *The Stream of Life*. Translated by Earl Fitz. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989.

² The term biopolitics moves away, from the idea of *zoo-politics*, which refers to the politics that takes into consideration *zoé*, the undifferentiated totality of the living, animals, humans, and non-humans. The prevalence of the term *bios* over *zoé* is due to the appearance, at the beginning of the XIXth Century of the term "biology." The prevalence of *bios* is precisely due to Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's (1744-1829) project of a science of living bodies, of the living as living, as Edgardo Castro (2011, p.19) points out. Fabián Ludueña Romandini (2010) currently reappropriates the idea of *zoo-politics*, as a way of connecting life and politics without relying on the exclusion of *zoé*, but rather by its politicization.

mere creature and the bodily); or even a simple *tautology*, "Doesn't all politics deal with life?" (LEMKE, 2011, p.2).³ The term biopolitics implies a constitutive instability that reflects the terms vitality and the "peculiar semantic mobility" that is proper to it (BAZZICALUPO, 2017, p.41).⁴ Hence, its oscillation occurs, going through a hesitation between the two terms that combine the category: What should we understand as *bíos*? Would it be possible to elaborate on an exclusive hypothesis between life and politics?

All this leads to a nuance, according to Espósito (2008),⁵ between two tonalities and categories: on the one hand, life in relation to politics or life as an object of politics, the capability to make live or life translatable as politics (politics that is exerted exteriorly *on life*); and on the other hand, the political side of *bíos*, the interior of politics, constitutive of life, life as the subject of politics (politics that is immanent *in life*). If we consider the Greek lexicon, especially the Aristotelic (AGAMBEN, 1998, pp.1-14),⁶ biopolitics remits to a *zoé* dimension: life in its simple biological maintenance, with no qualification, stripped from any formal attributes (should we perhaps refer to it as a *zoopolitics*?). In its semantic content, the term highlights the connection between the meaning of *what is alive* and especially of *what is human*. In this sense, a biopolitical line of thought can then allow opening a vast field of problems and questions: What consequences does this encounter have, the conceptual syntagma or the reciprocal interpellation between life and power? What is the nature of this relationship? Are they external dimensions? Or do they reveal an intrinsic imbrication, an original combination? (GIORGI; RODRIGUEZ, 2007, p.2). In this sense, we want to highlight the set of oppositions and epistemological demarcations that seem to function as conditions of possibility for the fixation of a sense to the idea of biopolitics: the difference between life (as an exceptionally humane matter) and no life (animal, mechanical, vegetal, spectral), the limit between life and death (which in Foucault is interplayed between the *making die* and the reverse, *foster life*), the living entities

³ LEMKE, TH. *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*. Translated by Eric Frederick Trump. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

⁴ In the original: "particular movilidad semántica."

⁵ ESPÓSITO, R. *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

⁶ AGAMBEN, G. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller Roazen. Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

against the non-living (HARAWAY, 2016),⁷ and the purely biological life compared to a form of life, a formed life, or a qualified one (BISET, 2016).

Over the broad routes paved around biopolitics, there is a focus that places to the center of the constitutively political dimension of life (at the individual and population levels) and the managerial ways of that life, *fostering* life and its counterpart, the letting die. These distinctions are the axis of the canonic theorizations by Michel Foucault, along with the Italian reading by Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, and Roberto Esposito, up to the considerations of Nikolas Rose, Peter Miller, and Paul Rabinow. In the discussions that delve around the precarious condition, with Judith Butler at the center but also with Richard Gilman-Opalsy, Guillaume Le Blanc, Guy Standing, Athena Athanasiou, Lauren Berlant, Isabell Lorey, and the Spaniard Remedios Zafra, the emphasis is placed on the type of exposed corporeal life and dependent on others, defined mainly by its physical vulnerability and its potential of being damaged, and its existentially finite and contingent condition. But specific paths undertaken by the cultural critique in the past decades bring to surface an epochal dimension, not only a political logic, or a governmental rationality (which Foucault described as the neo-liberal governmentality), a corporeal life signaled by the mutual exposition and vulnerability, or the processes of dispossession and expropriation that damages such condition (ATHANASIOU; BUTLER, 2013);⁸ but rather a precarious life, a *bíos*-precarious which opens a politicization threshold and which can be, at the same time, a field of experimentations across several levels: conceptual, formal, aesthetic, and political.

From this angle, there seems to be a point that would be useful to clarify in advance: Why *bíos*, and not *nuda vita* or *zoé*? Why *bíos*, and why not a way-of-life? We can locate *bíos*-precarious at this intersection, in between Roberto Esposito and Judith Butler and separated from the thinking of Giorgio Agamben (1998),⁹ who identifies in biopolitics – and the sovereign regime – a field of incisions and partitioning practices between the recognizable lives and the lives to abandon, or the conversion of the *bíos* (a specific and qualified way of life) into *zoé* (the bare life). According to Agamben, the

⁷ HARAWAY, D. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke, 2016.

⁸ ATHANASIOU, A; BUTLER, J. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political Conversations with Athena Athanasiou*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

⁹ For reference, see footnote 6.

governmental machine of the Occident is the one that articulates a theological-political paradigm, a theological-economic one, and a paradigm of glory and spectacle. It operates as a state of exception, that is, as a State that includes upon itself the anomic element that establishes it and whose mission is to capture and produce the bare life, the *nuda vita*. Biopolitics, in Agamben's path, is characterized by producing the supposition of mere life, and in pretending so, in the way of a vicious cycle, produces it (MOYANO, 2019, p.294). But biopolitics is also characterized in the conceptual development of his thought, in a wager in favor of minor biopolitics (AGAMBEN, 2003), which directs attention to a life that is inseparable from its forms, or a life that cannot be isolated as bare life. In other words, every life is already a way-of-life that is about, primarily, individual ways, living acts, and processes that are possibilities of life and imagination, of common potencies (*General Intellect*).

Bios-precarious is a syntagma that is distant from Agamben's proposal. *Bios-precarious* can superimpose and juxtapose Esposito's affirmative biopolitics and impersonal philosophy with Butler's bodily social ontology. In Esposito's (2008;¹⁰ 2010;¹¹ 2011;¹² 2012;¹³ 2015a;¹⁴ 2015b;¹⁵ 2015c)¹⁶ line of work *bios* names the singularity of life processes that are recognized at the interior of the immunization mechanism (*katékhon, phármakon* figure), which operates dialectically by increment, protection, and development of life. Reaching an aporetic point, it stops any further development, or destruction and annihilation. At the heart of immunity functioning, which as we know is included as the third term in between the sovereign and biopolitics, Esposito identifies a line of flight to the theological-judicial-biomedic capture of the deploying immunity, now not *upon* life, but rather upon life's immanent normativity. *Bios* signals something else: it is not the negation or privation of what is shared in

¹⁰ For reference, see footnote 5.

¹¹ ESPOSITO, R. *Communitas: the Origin and Destiny of Community*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. California: Stanford University Press, 2010.

¹² ESPOSITO, R. *Immunitas: The Protection and Negations of Life*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

¹³ ESPOSITO, R. *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*. Translated Rhiannon Noel Welch. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

¹⁴ ESPOSITO, R. *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. New York: Fordham University, 2015a.

¹⁵ ESPOSITO, R. *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015b.

¹⁶ ESPOSITO, R. *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015c.

common (the *proprium*), nor is it the mechanics of enclosing the body over itself and inside itself. *Bios* rather signals a projectual horizon of the subject outside himself, a shared reciprocal relationship that exposes the subject to contact and even to contagion with the other, or with the *sôma*, which is the constitutive part of *the flesh of the world*. A vital and compositive potential, which is a capability of modifying ourselves, *bíos* is a transplant, prosthetic incorporation, and graft, because it shatters the boundaries of personal property, the dimensions of what is inside and outside, natural and artificial. *Bios* has yet another defining characteristic, and that is by contrast to the norm that makes incisions into life. Esposito's remark is the following: at the opposing reverse of life's normativization, *bios* inflects as an attempt of vitalizing the norm, or as pure vital facticity in its absolute singularity. It is all about a living being that is always beyond its self, going over the individual sphere, its pre-established forms and figures, in variation and mobilization of bodies. *Bios* is any form of existence that has equal legitimacy to live in a complex relationship with the surroundings and in a framework of relations in which it is necessarily inserted. Such is the situation in which *bíos* moves upon, as a living being that depends on connections and encounters with other intensities that, as an immanent rule of life, is a result of a process of successive individuations and reproduction, but as a process of de-individualization or of de-subjectivation as well, because nobody remains in the same state for a long time, self-identical. As it is noticeable at this point, Esposito follows the Deleuzian and Spinozist legacy, which configures a line of thought about the virtual in relationship to a life that permanently oscillates between the actual and the virtual, which exceeds any possible actualization. Precisely because of that, it produces relationships along with others, affirming its singular style and rhythm.

In an ulterior meaning, Esposito identifies, within the person's mechanism (*Il dispositivo della persona*), an area that overflows and surpasses its mechanism. The person, as a category, functions as a biopolitical dominance operator, because it exposes living hierarchies, unequal distributions, and corporeal reifications. The "theological-political machine" captures, from the person, a duplicity threshold in between the person (juridical-artificial capacity) and the production of its negative opposite, the thing (a biological element with no value, part beast and animal, inert matter, or utterly non-human). This structural unfolding element, or even of excluding assimilation,

settles over a logic that seems to articulate unity and division, in two asymmetric parts, the spheres of *bios* and *zoé* (the one submitted to the other). The person, as a concept, also entails a tanato-politics derive, whose functioning consists of leaving or violently dismissing all of that which is not considered a person in the human being, and, as a consequence, it can be destined to die. It is precisely there where the Italian thinker locates an impersonal *bios* as a field of responses, in the alteration and contamination of its prevalent meaning, which gives potency to the opening to other life possibilities. Between the extreme positions of person and thing, between human and natural, the focus of one of the genealogical analysis is on the emptying of the humanist overtone in a long-standing tradition that defines humankind as distant and different from the animal, or in contraposition to an area of beastly humanity. The upsetting order of what is human and animal allows opening up to change and metamorphosis, multiplicity or plurality, all of which can begin to take into account the infinite difference between each singular life and, at the same time, that which is the pre-individual and post-individual in each one of living beings. The immanent potency of the *impersonal bios*, which is recognizable in Maurice Blanchot's neutral (*ne-uter*) and in E. Benveniste's appraisal of the sphere of the "se" (oneself), which constitutes an interrogation plane about the forms, bodies and their orientation models, is associated with a mobile margin of vicinity and interchange among livings.

2 Precariousness is The Insurmountable Horizon of our Time

Judith Butler (2004b;¹⁷ 2009;¹⁸ 2011;¹⁹ 2013;²⁰ 2015)²¹, on her account, based on the precarious conceives of a social ontology of bodies that is proposed as an alternative epistemology to the liberal and neo-liberal matrix of the proprietary subject. Life's precariousness, in this vein, opposes the discrete and walled ontology of

¹⁷ BUTLER, J. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London; New York: Verso, 2004b.

¹⁸ BUTLER, J. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London; New York: Verso, 2009.

¹⁹ BUTLER, J. For and Against Precarity. *TIDAL: Occupy Theory*, v. 1, 2011. Available at: https://occupyduniya.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/tidal_occupytheory.pdf. Access on: 21 Aug. 2019.

²⁰ BUTLER, J. *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political Conversations with Athena Athanasiou*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

²¹ BUTLER, J. *Notes Toward A Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.

possessive individualism. Life's precariousness, the vulnerable condition of being-with, leads us to ask about the ways in which our societies and our structural dependency to social recognition norms build up what we define as life, and, precisely because of that, the social and economic conditions so that it all remains as such.

Butler opposes the neo-liberal rationale that underlies the ontology of possessive individualism and identifies the second level of juxtaposed and convergent processes of precarization: on the one hand, *precariousness* and *dispossession* name an ontological-existential condition of the bodies, a constitutive openness, this always being outside the self, this being made of bonds and relationship with others. This condition implies a precise recognition of the *relational characteristic of our existence* with people and with the surroundings as well as with norms and normative framing: every existence is in a framework of power relations, and there is no life that is capable of exceeding the normative framework, but rather reiterations-iterations that are internal to it, slips, or normative re-significations *in situ*.

Our existence, according to Butler, has a relational character, which aims at the linkage with interdependent (social, economic, biological, ecological) networks, and allows not only survival and protection, but also violence, physical disappearance, femicide, and aggression. Moreover, the point of departure of this constitutive relatedness in linking networks assumes that all human life is basically bodily, and because it assumes death, finitude, physical and physiological needs, its condition is to be a constitutively vulnerable being, exposed to contact with others. On another hand, in convergence and juxtaposition, this shared condition of being precarious is what makes us different: some bodies are more exposed and protected than others. What irremediably happens is that precarity is assigned differently, or becoming disposed appears as a privative form, a category that exposes the maximization of precisely the vulnerability that constitutes who we are (a fragile but necessary dimension of our interdependence). However, it is subject to differential distributions; that is, it alludes to specific historical forms that deal with social and economic relationships, to the presence or absence of infra-structures and institutions that organize the protection of bodily needs.

3 Blind Areas and Common Problems

Bios-precarious. The issue, then, comes back again. We need to argue about why we use this conceptual formula. Why *bios*-precarious? Both terms are in mutual tension to point out something that cannot be named in any other way. What we can find at the point of convergence is where we find the double valence of the syntagma: on the one hand, *the question about the living (bios)* which is at the core of the biopolitical thought, and which Esposito addresses as a type of impersonal-neutral-anonymous life that goes outside the person's silhouette, out of the auto-immune body's shape, and out of the object-thing regime. However, as Butler points out, the question regarding the living lies in the inside of the mechanism, or at the interior of the normative framework as in inner displacement. Under the same current of meaning, the question regarding the living points towards the conditions of possibility (social, economic, political) so that life can continue going on as-is: This is the line of inquiry that Butler reclaims our structural dependence on social recognition norms, and how our societies formulate definitions about what life is. And it is precisely how we define life that such *conditions of possibility for life* can appear. What is life? And what are the normative, social, economic, eco-political conditions that make it sustainable and livable? From this angle, the question about the living and its conditions of possibility overlaps, because they aim to the same transversal axis, along with precariousness.

On the other hand, against an underground legacy that Esposito identifies with the Roman-Christian tradition, and which Butler refers to as a liberal heritage, in both paths, we find an unquestioned assumption that cuts across and continuously seals off an understanding about what it means to "be-with," or what are the relationships of interdependence with others. That is, all of this constitutes the person's theological-political device, the theological-biomedical semantics of immunity, and the late liberal matrix of possessive individualism. From this perspective, both Butler and Esposito propose relational ontologies for the ex-tactical subject, for the "being-with," but at different levels. In Esposito, the subject's projection outside the self supposes a type of reciprocal relationship that exposes the subject to the contact beyond the frontiers of personal property, and even to the contagion to the other, or to the *sôma*, which is a constitutive part of *the world's flesh*. In Butler, it is an exposition that defines

interdependence with others and in terms of social norms that constitute us. The common precariousness is an ontological condition that assumes life's interdependence (to other living beings, but also norms and power relations) and the ecstatic character of vulnerable bodies.

At this point, an outline of a propositive aspect of *bios*-precarious appears, which – at least from this angle –, seems to assign the ecstatic and open, cut across by exterior agents, in contrast to the way-of-life that refers mainly to the individual modes, the acts, and processes of living. Unlike Agamben, the being-with and the interdependence networks are not limited to the individual forms and the acts of a life inseparable from its forms, but instead point to an expansive process of precariousness, which inflects knowledge, experiences, and collective areas at heterogeneous levels.

Bíos-precarious summons Esposito and Butler, when a toolbox assumes a line of inquiry that the other does not account for: a life's ontology (Esposito's impersonal *bios* is defined over the life norm, departing from the exposition, vital opening, and bodily contagion) that is configured as precarious (existentially vulnerable, ecstatic, and exposed to others), precisely due to an epochal diagnosis, the times of a new neo-liberal intensity (BUTLER, 2004b;²² 2009)²³ and its corresponding process that normalizes precariousness (LOREY, 2015).²⁴ And precisely because of that, we should notice that even if both Butler and Esposito identify an unquestioned common core, it is with Butler that this being-with (impersonal *bios*) can then be called *bios*-precarious. And as it goes with an interplay of inverted mirrors, it is with Esposito that we can call precarious life as an impersonal *bios*, or even understand such a precarious life in explicitly biopolitical terms.²⁵ *Bios*-precarious appears over the contrasts of affirmative

²² For reference, see footnote 17.

²³ For reference, see footnote 18.

²⁴ LOREY, I. *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*. Translated by Aileen Derieg. London: Verso, 2015.

Our proposal is unlike Janell Watson's (2012), who finds in Butler and Esposito a shared conceptual logic, maintaining a relationship "linked to the biopolitical limits of a liberal discourse" in the valences of the pairs: *bíos*/immunitas and precarity/precariousness. We propose, and this is our position, to read a complementarity in a shared ontology that overflows the (neo)liberal framing, in which one conceptual toolbox is embedded with the other, but only after achieving a critical diagnosis and resistance to the present time.

²⁵ In Butler's work the explicit mentions to biopolitics are at least scarce. To hve an example, the identification with life sciences, vitalism, and State racism is in *Frames of War*. Butler herself recognizes her debt with this vast field of research (SOLEY-BELTRAN; PRECIADO, 2007). But despite this, it is possible to trace a reading code or a biopolitical procedure in her interest in thinking the adjustment, life's

biopolitics and a bodily social ontology that is drafted over linkage of contact and contagion (a *unicum*) between *bios* and *zoé*, form and force, modality and substance, the dispossessed-precarious life but in terms of gifting relationships and interdependence with human livings, and not humans, norms, and normative framing.

In this way, considering the articulation between both tool-boxes, it is crucial to notice which legacies and traditions each one really prioritizes. In general terms, Butler privileges Derrida and Foucault; and Esposito, Deleuze. As Esposito points out, *bios* is a line of fleeing from the person's device, as is of the theological-biomedical semantic on immunity. In Butler, it is an ontological condition with regards to interdependence with norms and other lives: in such a way, no life exceeds this normative frame, but there are rather internal displacements. And this is just one side that does not acquire enough relevance in Esposito's affirmative biopolitics: every life is saturated, in a greater or lesser extent, by power. The excess of life, the capability for variation and empowerment does not presuppose as much of a life's overflow in contrast to a norm that tries to break through it, or even a norm that tends to subdue life's innovative potency; instead, the assumption is that, in Butler's Derridean interpretation, the displacements and subversive re-significations happen inside the norm. It is in its intrinsically iterative nature that the deviances and excesses undergo. Life is, from the beginning, in mechanisms: of immunity, normativization, and personifying. And in their own reiterative reproduction, they reach a form toward a displacement to vital facticity that enables the norm's subversive vitalization.

4 A Seismograph of the Present Time

This conceptual space of assembling and connection allows us to notice the triangulation in which *bios*-precarious is configured, coming out of the toolboxes provided by Esposito, Butler, and the dimensions that are not present in them. In other terms, three great vectors compose the *bios*-precarious: Esposito's affirmative biopolitics, Butler's corporeal ontology, and a glimpse at an epochal dimension, all of which settle the conditions to think precariousness as ontology.

limits and even the question about the social and economic conditions that sustain life. Eduardo Mattio's work (2017) turns out to be a key piece in this line of inquiry.

The syntagma *bios*-precarious operates as a coagulator for imaginaries, figurations, languages, and images, as a cultural mechanism to condense meanings, but also as a conceptual and systematic tool with which it is possible to trace a seismograph of the present time. We are referring here to the analytical treatment with the works and cultural material that refer to the present, the responsive and reformulating ways that culture brings forward (RUCOVSKY, 2018; 2019). The matter is about what that present is: What is this present about in which we all, in one way or another, belong? What does it exactly mean when we talk about the present time, “today,” now? What is the difference that today brings in relation to yesterday? What characterizes it in its analytical description and diagnostic test, but in its contradictions as well as confrontations?

It is about a relationship with the present time that, in the wake of a Foucaultian reading on Kant (1984),²⁶ means a shift in the way we look at ourselves. One question points to the other: What is my actuality? And what impact does it have that I speak with it? What is the current range of our experiences? And what is the current range of possible experiences? The attitude and will to assign to oneself the own present time as a duty is what Michel Foucault calls *current ontology*, following the illuminist inspiration of Kant’s texts. This expression labels a way of relating ontologically with and against the current time, a duty and a type of analytical attitude (an *ethos*, or continual critique) of the singular time, upon that historical way of being in which writing happens and the reason to do so. It is about a reflexive relationship with the present time that aims not only at the vertiginous movement of what happens (a transitory time, of the fugitive and contingent) nor at the tight forces that cross it through. Instead, it mainly refers to the permanent critique of one’s own story, of the choice about what we are, and what in its latent potency can reveal and liberate that which we could be. In this sense, *bios*-precarious emerges in the reading operations with cultural materials that demarcate a present time defined greatly by neo-liberalism, by the fall of modernization and dreams of progress, indeterminacy and fluctuation, the lack of guarantees, or projections, and the deflection of teleological temporalities.

²⁶ FOUCAULT, M. What is Enlightenment? In: RABINOW, P. (ed.). *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, pp.32-51.

Our time is when precariousness becomes perceptible, and we make sense among precariousness: Anna Tsing (2015, p.20) writes that “our time is ripe for sensing precarity.” Or in other terms, precarity is not the exception among how things work in a well-balanced world but rather the *ontological condition of our time* (TSING, 2015, p.20). There is a part of this epochal sense in *bíos*-precarious as a category: this is what grounds the conditions to think about precarity *as an ontology of the current time*. Indeed, this is what happens when critically analyzing cultural materials (RUCOVSKY, 2018; 2019) or as exposed above in the first two scenes (referring to the Health Secretary and the emotional salary): there is an opening to a field of formal experimentations, but also to alternative epistemologies when apprehending the present as such, in its fields of struggle and lines of tension, in how it is possible to transform, transgress, and imagine potentialities. Culture and aesthetics are then capable to condense and capture. And that capability is measured here around the meanings of what this formula entails: *bíos*-precarious, a ground in which precarious life becomes a disputed threshold, where ways of agency spawn around politization and critical essay.

An expansive field of formal experimentations opens up through *bíos*-precarious: what it means to “make live” (*fostering* life) and its counterpart; the ways of managing the “making die”; how to understand life and how to make it recognizable; what the conditions under which a life can be sustainable (*livability*) are; how to make life or a life livable;²⁷ what the (human and non-human) networks are, to which lives are given and where they are sustained; what pre-individual and impersonal living forces have place; and what is the variation and excess potencies that inhabit life, or what are the thresholds of the unthought-of, the irrepresentable, and of what is possible from corporeal vulnerability.

The *bíos*-precarious matter and its place in culture implies a rethinking of how culture, philosophy, and cultural critique – but also the knowledge that is produced immanently with aesthetic materials – “thinks about and responds to a historical

²⁷ The oscillation between *a* life and *life* («life as such») marks a cleavage point in Butler’s biopolitical interpretation. Beyond the explicit references that the author uses, the matter is not so much about life’s ontological specificity that Butler (in *Frames of War*, for instance) identifies with the question about animal’s *bíos* compared with humans (animal rights), or the living being compared to what is not (a fetus, an embryo, or interruption rights), but rather about the instability and mobility of the category. In this sense, the question about *a* life, about the conditions under which a life can be livable and worthy of being cried for, its capability for being recognized as precarious goes hand in hand with a relational and modal understanding of life. That is a wager towards affirmative biopolitics, an impersonal and neutral life norm, a life in its singularity and difference.

horizon defined greatly by biopolitics” (GIORGI, 2014, p.17)²⁸ and precariousness (BUTLER, 2009;²⁹ STANDING, 2011; LOREY, 2015). And to tackle such figure, tautological by definition – life is from the start precarious, finite, contingent and vulnerable –, we will consider the inquiry about the matter of *bios* and precariousness that acquired increasing relevance in philosophical and cultural critique. But there is also trouble in the lexicon itself, the conceptual syntagma *bios*-precarious in the horizons of biopolitics and precariousness: what are the conditions of possibility for the precarized livings? What is this transversal condition that illuminates the general dimensions of the living and that we call *bíos*-precarious? In which way are these two ideas related, these two critical diagnoses, and what is the relevance to think about the present, the time of what is present? Is there a mutual relationship of implication? And to be more exact, what is the specificity about precariousness as a concept, compared to the logic of biopolitics in a present time marked by the openly consolidating neo-liberal program?

This is why it is convenient to ask if it is a sole concept working with two coordinated terms in which both expressions may appear as synonyms, or if rather it has a different semantic value. And if this is the case, what does this difference consist of, and which is the strategic sense of its conjunction? Rather than redundancy, *bios*-precarious situates itself in a triangulation that unites and relates both analytical apparatus, Butler and Esposito, but also into a knowledge that is produced from different critical analysis, aesthetic and cultural materials. We are referring to a toolbox that is built over the immanent complementarity of their conceptual practices, but *bíos*-precarious is also the path to think about a shared blind spot, about certain aspects and levels, such as temporality and the epochal matter, the moody and affective regime (RUCOVSKY, 2019a; 2019b), the non-human and the contamination and devastation of eco-systemic contexts (RUCOVSKY, 2018a; 2018b), the working with aesthetic materials, and the formal operations that are not considered enough, but also work, poverty, and class indicators (RUCOVSKY, 2016).

Finally, the conceptual tie in *bíos*-precarious inhabits in a generalized estranging state that seems to function as a privileged area for inquiries in culture. Effectively,

²⁸ In the original: “piensa y contesta un horizonte histórico definido en gran medida por la biopolítica.”

²⁹ For reference, see footnote 18.

what do literature and culture know about new ways of subjectivation and ways of life to which work and poverty are places where identities and projects stopped being a measure and substance of the social? (LAERA; RODRÍGUEZ, 2019, p.33). What culture and literature declare refers to the decomposition of the Fordist type of the work universe and the associated cultural grammar related to poverty but whose contents do not attain symbolization. In this same sense, *bíos*-precarious has not been the other side of poverty and work, but rather, departing from the neo-liberal inflection, precariousness works as a sensor of the incipient displacement: work loses track as a social grammar because, precisely, having a job does not place the person into a given social level anymore: having a job can be compatible with living in poverty. Here, the figure of the *working poor* is the sign that brings new senses to the surface: it is different from the prevailing stability of the industrial proletariat (at salary level, but also as a social classifier) and it refers to the “structural and organizational fragmentation of the formally employed class” (PACHECO, 2019, p.169),³⁰ but it also points to the adaptations: of expectation, and vital will in terms of a permanent rotation, the lack of foreseeable futures, or social progress narratives, and even more, pointing to increasing volatility and labor instability (STANDING, 2014, p.8).³¹

Bíos-precarious is not even reducible, in this sense, to new subjectivities, to a new class or a social indicator such as the precariat (STANDING, 2011), the cognitariat, or the povertariat as Pablo Semán (2017) suggests. Precariat, cognitariat or povertariat are categories around a political dispute, malleable conceptualizations and with imprecise borders, rather than sociological taxonomies, or demographic indexes.

³⁰ In the original: “fragmentación estructural y organizacional de la clase formalmente ocupada.”

³¹ In the Fordist-industrial imagery, work represents a figure characterized by stability and permanence, all of which allows the social promotion and which acts as a biopolitical reverse to poverty. As a pious vision upon the working class, work runs as the last rank of human dignity and citizenship, a mark for identity and social protection; and work appears as a possibility for redemption against poverty. Poverty (*paupertas*) is then a sign of dispossession and abandonment, a state of continual need and resignation – which Agamben (2014) identifies with Franciscanism –, but at the same time places focus on conducts, gestures, physiognomies and bodily features of the racialized otherness, the sub-human, the in-human, the beast-like and the zoological. Nonetheless, what happens in literature and contemporary art when work and poverty become unrecognizable because the ways in which reality and meaning are produced have been transformed under the neo-liberal landscape? Unlike the violence that inscribes poverty to radical distance, precarity illuminates physical proximity of the contagious and adjacent that begins to filter and permeate with new ways into the social landscape. In other words, if “the poor is always the other; the precarious is, in change, the messenger of new insecurity from which I am not, nor will I ever be, well enough protected” (GIORGI, 2019, p.70) [in the original: “pobre es, siempre, el otro; el precario es, en cambio, el mensajero de una nueva inseguridad de la cual no estoy ni estaré nunca lo suficientemente protegido”]. On this point, Gabriel Giorgi’s work (2019) on *Macabea*, by Clarice Lispector, is a crucial piece. Also, see my previous inquiry in Rucovsky (2016).

As precarious we could name a number of figures: online marketers, company's interns and freelance workers, itinerant salespeople and popular economy sellers, cognitive workers and in the cultural industry, the app delivery bike dealers and transport services (Rappi, Pedidos Ya, Globo, Uber, etc.), home workers in domestic care, laundry and cleaning services, housekeepers and babysitters, supermarket cashiers, carton gatherers and recyclers, security guards, temporary and/or seasonal jobs in textile or industry assemblies. Ambivalent categories and with permeable edges, they point to a problematic unresolved area with a long going conceptuality: who are those that fit, or who do the precariat, cognitariat, povertariat name? What novelty signs do they carry through, and what other things to they mobilize? What is their epistemological reach and ontological malleability?

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