The Government of Life
Foucault, Biopolitics, and Neoliberalism

Edited by Vanessa Lemm and Miguel Vatter
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In this essay I discuss what I call the four ages of security. My reconstruction of the four great ages of security owes much to the work of Foucault, and I will address the idea of biopolitics through the lens of the fourth age of security. The four ages of security refer neither to social or political practices, nor to representations or mentalities. They stand for four great historical problematizations of security that Foucault marked out, but did not fully develop. For that matter, the concepts of “security” and “biopolitics” were never objects of any sustained conceptual elaboration on Foucault’s part. The schema I propose is by no means definitive, and constitutes a set of hypotheses rather than one thesis. I will describe four homogenous, relatively systematic sets of statements (énoncés) that have had important effects on political and ethical reality. I am describing knots of problematization.

The first age of security is the spiritual age and corresponds to the first sense taken on by the term “security” in the West. The word “security”
Frédéric Gros

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derives from the Latin *securitas*, which can be deconstructed into *sine curae*: without troubles, without cares. The Greek equivalent, *a-taraxia*, also means without worries, without unrest. Security designates, in its first problematization, the mental state of the wise man that has attained definitive serenity through a series of appropriate spiritual exercises. Here, security has a spiritual meaning, rather than a political one. Seneca writes in the *Letters to Lucilius*, “Securitas proprium bonum sapientis est.” Security is the proper goal of the wise man. A certain number of remarks can be made with respect to this first sense of security. First, Foucault describes this state of mental serenity as well as the techniques of the self that allow for its attainment, mainly in his 1982 course at the Collège de France titled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, which strongly emphasizes the wisdom of the Stoics. It is important to note that it is only in Hellenistic and Roman philosophy that security comes to be thought as the aim of the philosophical life. In the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, the term *ataraxia* is mostly absent. However, in the works of the Skeptics, the Stoics, the Epicureans, and the Cynics, the idea of *ataraxia* takes on a capital importance, since the pursuit and attainment of this security will come to define the philosophical enterprise. Philosophy is an enterprise of security in the sense that it promises to help achieve this mental state. What varies from one philosophical school of thought to another is the means and techniques to attain *ataraxia*, as well as the quality of this mental state itself. Let me provide only a few brief indications of these differences. For the Skeptics, *ataraxia* depends on a mental conversion, called *epokhe*, through which one renounces all judgments pertaining to the truth of what happens to oneself. There follows a mental security, a serenity made up of detachment and indifference. Abandoning the illusory pursuit of some definitive truth, one learns to experience a steadiness of the soul that permits one to maintain a perpetual calm in the midst of events. For the Epicureans, instead, *ataraxia* is conceived as the securing of the simple pleasure of existing. Through regular practices of meditating on the gods, conversation with friends, contemplation of basic philosophical precepts, and actively remembering moments of joy from the past, the goal is the crystallization of the pure happiness of existence, so as to make it a feeling that is always at one’s disposal. For the Stoics, *ataraxia* or *securitas* hinges on a long series of exercises, of *askeses*, of constant and highly codified tests, a series that has been studied in depth by
Foucault, as for example the sorting of representations, meditation on death, morning and evening self-examination, and so forth. The goal is to reach in this way a perfect mastery of oneself and of one’s emotions, to constitute a strong ego that would be able to act in the world and confront the world’s hazards without ever allowing oneself to become destabilized. This Stoic security designates the stability of a subject who does not allow him- or herself to be moved by anything and who has at his or her disposal spiritual means that are powerful enough to prevail over all of the world’s misfortunes. This first sense of security as serenity, as the condition of the wise man, as steadiness of disposition has been of great importance for our culture. It returns again in contemporary philosophy, when Wittgenstein, for example, in his *Lecture on Ethics*, says that security constitutes one of the three fundamental moral experiences. It is important to understand that in this first sense “security” does not refer to the feeling of being protected or to the absence of any danger, but instead to the capacity to maintain the tranquility of one’s soul in the middle of these dangers and to find the source of security exclusively within oneself.

The second age of security is the imperial age, a concept that has often been suggested by Foucault, even if he never devoted any longer exploration to this problem. Still, on at least three occasions during his course at the Collège de France—for example, the lectures of March 22, 1978; January 5, 1983; and February 2, 1984—Foucault evokes the famous political myth of the Middle Ages, the Empire of the last days, a myth based on Christian millenarian doctrine. This millenarian doctrine—largely founded on (re)readings of the Apocalypse of Saint John and the Pauline Epistles, particularly the letter to the Thessalonians, in which the famous expression “pax et securitas” can be found—consists in the belief in a period of a thousand years preceding the Last Judgment which will be a period of peace, prosperity, and happiness on Earth, and which idyllic era would be followed by a series of great catastrophes (climactic, political, and social) and brought to an end with a final confrontation with the forces of Evil. The Church quite rapidly condemned this doctrine of one thousand years of terrestrial happiness before the Last Judgment and the end of the world. However, it has not ceased to reappear throughout history, and in particular it reappears in the High Middle Ages and takes on an important political dimension. Naturally, the simple utopia of a period of happiness,
peace, and tranquility promised to humanity is not in itself particularly original and can be found in a number of cultures and historical periods. It often represents nothing more than the expression of a hope oriented toward the future which is complementary to a nostalgic longing for the golden age of the disappeared past. On the other hand, what is particularly interesting about the Christian millenarianism of the Middle Ages is the way in which this period of peace comes to graft itself on the idea of Empire and on the idea of security. This synthesis between the ideas of Empire, peace, and security had already been prepared by the Roman Empire in the time of Nero when one could find coins engraved with the motto “pax et securitas.” But in the European Middle Ages this security, a propaganda theme in the Roman Empire, becomes a political program founded on a mystical hope. In millenarian doctrine, this thousand-year period before the Last Judgment will witness simultaneously the end of history and the disappearance of borders. Indeed, this period of peace and security presupposes the establishment of a single Empire, the Empire of the last days, which brings together all nations around one single faith and in one single political space. One sole flock, as these millennium texts repeat over and again, with one solitary shepherd. The great problem that confronts the medieval West is how to know who this last Emperor will be: will he be French (a new Charlemagne), German (a new Frederick), or might it even be the pope, leader of Christendom? Every successful kingly campaign to conquer foreign lands or expand the borders of the realm was typically interpreted as a possible sign of the coming of the Emperor of the last days, of the onset of an age of peace and security, and of the end of history. As if authentic security could only be obtained by the constitution of a perfectly homogenous political and cultural space, and by the exclusion or destruction of all the figures of the Other. The last great resurgence of this political myth in the contemporary world was during the first Persian Gulf War promising a New World Order, made possible by the end of the Cold War and by the faith in the immanent extension of the model of liberal democracy to the entire globe. The president of the United States thus would have been the Emperor of the last days and the pax Americana would have led to the reign of a definitive security. For here security is Empire; security is the unification of worlds; security is the end of history.
The third age of security corresponds to the history of Western Europe and the rise of political philosophies centered on the state of nature and the social contract, that is, Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, and Rousseau. Foucault elaborated on this third age at length in his course *Security, Territory, Population* at the Collège de France in 1978, in his studies of reason of state (*raison d’État*) and, in particular, in the development of the diplomatic–military *dispositif*, as well as in 1976, in his interpretation of Hobbes’s thought in *Society Must Be Defended*. This third age of security can be understood on the basis of the disappearance of the medieval dream of Empire, starting with the construction of a new political space composed of a plurality of sovereign states, each attempting to maintain its individual place in the midst of all the others, exemplified by Westphalian Europe. Here it is no longer a question of security as a spiritual condition, nor of the myth of an Empire of the last days. Instead, the goal is to think the consistency of a nation-state in the midst of history. Security will be defined as the consistency of the state, which is simultaneously the consistency supplied by the state to the rights of its citizens and to the existence of its subjects, and the consistency that the state provides for itself as one political subject in relation to others. Indeed, the very meaning of the word “security” is immediately divided into internal security and external security.

The great political philosophers of the modern age all thought of security as the goal of civil society, as the essential function of the state: “the virtue of a state is its security [*securitas*]”;4 “the people, who have a right to . . . provide for their own safety and security, which is the end for which they are in society”;5 “them that did institute the Common-Wealth, for their perpetual, and not temporary, security.”6 But clearly one must try to understand exactly what “security” entails in this new context. It is important to note here, that security is not simply a question of “public order,” and that in no way do these philosophies simply seek to legitimate a police state. Otherwise, one could not make intelligible why these texts, which all place security at the heart of a state’s legitimacy, were considered as dangerous and subversive by the ruling powers of their time. A general pattern can be found everywhere in the above-mentioned examples of modern political philosophies. Their point of departure is the description of a catastrophic state of nature, in which a certain number of natural, fundamental dispositions of man are made impossible: for example, the ownership of the fruits
of one’s labor, equality as well as solidarity between men, and, lastly, freedom in the authentic sense of the term. In the state of nature, ownership is fragile; violence, suspicion, and dependency are the rule. None of man’s natural, fundamental dispositions are able to develop themselves. This is to say that all modern political philosophers want to give a double meaning to the word “nature”: it refers either to the savage immediacy of the state of nature, or to the conformity to Reason and God (natural law or laws). The creation of society and the institution of the state have as their purpose to make possible the application of the laws of nature understood as rational and divine laws: let ownership gained through labor be guaranteed, let the equality of all before the law be respected, let public freedom be preserved, let human solidarity be maintained and encouraged. In all these texts, security does not appear as a right among others, but as the very movement through which our natural dispositions must be assured, guaranteed, maintained, and all this against the eventual abuses of power by a biased, unjust state and against the influence of pressure groups representing particular interests. Security is the process through which consistency must be given by the state and by society to the fundamental, natural dispositions of man, which, in the state of nature, are precarious and in vain.

But, soon enough, a second meaning of “security” will overlay this first meaning. Most of these authors (Hobbes, Rousseau, Spinoza) indicate, although in a purely marginal way, that states stand in relation to one another as individuals in the state of nature: a permanent state of war holds sway among them. But the situation is not entirely the same: the state of nature is less destructive, and the state of war less absolute, between states than between individuals, since this violent situation does not necessarily lead to the creation of a global society. Each state must provide its citizens with security, must give consistency to their natural rights, and also guarantee its own security as a political subject. But the term “security” cannot have the same meaning in both cases. The defining feature of “political realism” in thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau, Raymond Aron, and Henry Kissinger, to give some contemporary examples, is precisely the conception of security as external security. For a state, then, external security signifies the defense of its territorial integrity, the development of its military power, the necessity of alliances (which will always be fragile and reversible), the cynical calculation of its interests, the development of a systematic suspi-
cion of all other countries, and its ability to start wars or make peace as soon as its interests come into play. In expressions such as “nuclear security,” “UN Security Council,” or “collective security system” it is this sense of “security” which is predominant, and which has been predominant in Europe across the nineteenth century and up to the end of the Cold War. I refer to this sense of security as sovereign security.

Biopolitics names the fourth age of security. Thanks to Foucault’s analyses of neoliberalism and biopower, it is possible to define its outlines. I am here interested in analyzing a series of statements pertaining to security so as to be able to locate transformations and ruptures. These statements constitute a discursive network that defines, for any given security dispositif, an object (what must be secured or safeguarded: a spiritual condition, a unified world, a sovereign state), an actor (who must perform the securing: the wise man, the emperor, the state), a modality (how to perform this securing: by means of spiritual exercises, kindly solicitude, the constant threat of war), and a scope of action (that against which something must be secured: the pains of existence, the divisions of the world, invasions by the enemy). I have shown above that the set of these definitions varies historically. I propose that the contemporary era is marked by a very profound transformation in the idea of security itself, which is visible in a new discursive network, a new series of statements such as those pertaining to “human security,” “biosecurity,” “global security,” or even “affective security.” To simplify things somewhat, I proceed by opposition, by showing first of all how the biopolitical age can be opposed to the age of sovereign security.

The object of security has changed. The great statements of political realism named, as the principal object of security, the defense of the state’s territorial integrity, which may require the sacrifice of citizens. The doctrine of human security instead proclaims insistently that living populations and individuals ought to constitute the new object of security. They are what must be protected: what is sacred is no longer the sovereignty of the state, but the life of the individual. From here arises the principle of the right to interference, or what international institutions today define as the “responsibility to protect.” If today, in whatever corner of the world, the life of a population or populations is directly endangered (e.g., by a bloodthirsty state), this constitutes a breach of security as human security. As soon as the state is no longer the first and final object of security, everything that is
involved in the life of civil populations becomes an object of security. In this manner, one speaks today of “nutritional security” and “energy security.” The chief characteristic of these new objects of security is that they are constituted by flows: the flow of food, of energy, but also of images and of data (and, by simple extension, one speaks of “traffic security,” “information security,” “internet security,” etc.). On the subject of these two objects, life understood as the biological component of the human and the circulation of those objects necessary for this life, Foucault showed in his course of 1978 how, beginning in the early modern age, the police defines one part of itself as urban police, giving to itself the care over this part of life and over its circulation. This suggests that in searching for the genealogy of this new biopolitical security one must look closely at the police. While the modern age based security on the army and justice (on war and the law), the new age considerably enlarges the role of the police, as the securing of communications and the control of circulations.

This redistribution of objects also involves a redistribution of the principal actors of security. Previously, the state constituted itself simultaneously as the sole object and sole subject of security. Once the object of security is seen as constituted by civil populations, or by various flows, the principal actors of security change as well. One witnesses a double movement that leads constantly to the delegitimization of the state as sole actor of security: on the one hand, a privatization of security in which private companies and organisms present themselves as specialists in the control of a given flow, and on the other hand, a humanitarianization of security in which the protection of civil populations will fall under the aegis of humanitarian organizations that do not, unlike states, seek to protect one or more given sets of political subjects, but strive to come to the aid of civil populations that are at risk of death, no matter what the nature of this risk may be.

It is important to understand that one is here at the limits of Foucault’s analysis, or better, at the heart of the aporia he encountered. In 1976, in *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault constructs an opposition between an “anatomopolitics” understood as power over of the individual’s body through discipline, at work in institutions like the school, the factory, and the barracks, and a “biopolitics” understood as power over the population in its biological dimension through a regulatory politics carried on by the state. This articulation of biopolitics through the state makes it difficult to think bio-
politics together with liberalism, because the latter is defined as a governmentality of the weak state. This is why, at the end of the 1979 course, The Birth of Biopolitics, Foucault sketches a new paradigm which still stands in need of further elaboration. Namely, the definition of what would be a neoliberal biopolitics which is detached from the state. What is striking in this new dispositif of security is precisely that they are no longer governed by the imperatives of the state, but by the demands of the circulation of flows.

Thereby, the modalities of security undergo transformation. Inasmuch as security remained centered on the state, the modalities of security consisted in the threat of armed force and a dispositif of alliances: what Foucault called the diplomatic–military dispositif, that is, strength and cunning—the lion and the fox, to return to Machiavelli’s images. In this new configuration, two other paradigms emerge corresponding to the protection and to the control of flows. These two paradigms are not separate. After the Second World War, through the work of Donald Winnicott and Margaret Mahler (and later through the work of Franz Veldman and the school of haptonomy), an idea took shape in contemporary psychology that security is to be defined as the internal construction of the subject: security is what allows the child to grow up successfully. From here on child psychology is redefined as a technique for making the child secure. Security is understood simultaneously as protection—that is, the child must feel surrounded by a protective barrier, safe from external threats—and as the control of flow, since security is based on the regularity of flows of food and a regulated exchange, between parent and child, of the flows of communication and affection. It is striking the way in which the question of security is no longer posed in terms of closure as in the modern age, where the two symbols of security were the prison, for internal security, and the border, for external security, but, instead, in terms of the control of circulations and exchanges. The key sites of security are no longer borders defining the spaces of states, but, within the territory itself, airports and railway stations, that is, the nodal points of communication and exchange. The problem becomes one of “traceability”: the ability to determine, at any given moment, what is moving, where it is coming from, where it is going, what it is doing in its current place, and if it actually has a right of access to the network in which it is moving or if its use of the network is unauthorized. Finally, the technical groundwork enabling these acts of tracking is seen
more and more as based in the biological singularity of individuals, which opens up the question of biometrics.

The fourth transformation relates to the nature of the threat. Here, the doctrine of human security can act as a guide, since the majority of its efforts lie precisely in defining the new range of threats. One might even say, instead of “defining,” that this effort consists in enlarging this range of threats, to the greatest possible extent. What is indeed peculiar about this new doctrine is that it considers everything that might do harm to the living individual and to the good of civil populations as a threat.\(^8\) This new definition of security thus produces a continuous stream of threats, whether these are economic, climactic, social, ecological, political, hygienic, medical, or nutritional. Everything is part of one single continuum: natural disasters, epidemics, terrorist attacks, civil wars, rivalries between crime syndicates vying for the control of illicit trafficking in arms, drugs, people, climate change, poverty and unemployment, and so on. Today, all these threats are considered as risks to society understood in the broadest possible sense. In the interior of states, this *continuum* of threats is produced through the concept of “global security” which stands to a given population as “human security” stands to the whole of humanity, and which entails, in France and elsewhere, the fusion of all those institutional security authorities that had heretofore been separate. Today, it is commonly held that national, interior, medical, ecological, and other security departments ought to work together. The globalization of the world involves the abolition of the previous divisions between interior and exterior, criminal and enemy, the political and the natural. The biopolitical age of security has led to this great equivalence of all threats. This continuity and equalization entail the effacement of figures such as the worker, the citizen, the patriot, and so forth. All of them disappear for the benefit of the living individual whose vital nucleus must be secured, and nothing exists outside of the great community of living bodies, the security of which will be the responsibility of private organisms acting with the blessing of the state.

To conclude, I will propose two figures that to my mind incarnate this new biopolitical age of security, which one could also call the *global age of security*, and which, one day, will need to be opposed to the *total age of security* where there will be no more discussion of the state’s interests in an international milieu, but instead solely of the circulation of
flows in a globalized world. These two figures are the suspect and the victim.

The suspect must be distinguished from the enemy, who typically belongs to the third age of security. The enemy comes from the exterior and by the very fact of his threat patches up the holes in the national community. The enemy is identifiable and definable: he is a calculating and rational agent. The suspect, however, is by definition non-locatable and unpredictable. He is here, close at hand, and his threatening presence turns me into a stranger even to my closest neighbors. We live in an age of suspicion and distrust: suspect individuals, suspicious packages, suspect food. This generalized distrust appears as the shadowy side of globalization. On the other hand, one finds the victim. The new dispositif of security turns the individual, rather than the state, into a sacred object. Thus it is the suffering of the individual, his victimized condition, which now becomes scandalous. This figure of the victim makes the biopolitical security function through a new regime of affects that turn on compassion, which for its part is triggered by the various stagings offered by the media. Security, pity, image: this is the new articulation, different from the old system of sovereignty which drove national security through heroism and narrative.

In this essay, I have tried to extend Foucault’s analyses of biopolitics by attempting to understand what the ages of security may be, in general, and what biopolitical security may be, in particular. I believe that these four ages of security also imply four great modalities of surveillance that Foucault was able to demarcate here and there throughout his works. Spiritual security presupposes spiritual vigilance: the vigilance of the wise man who pays careful attention to his spiritual capacities and means of support, as well as to his possible weaknesses, as studied by Foucault in Hermeneutics of the Subject as one of the aspects of the care of the self. Imperial security presupposes paternal solicitude: the Emperor watches over his subjects like the shepherd over his flock, with that kindly care studied by Foucault in his writings on pastoral government. Sovereign security presupposes centralized surveillance of internal and external enemies, all submitted to the total gaze of the state as in Bentham’s Panopticon, the kingdom of spies. Biopolitical security implies flow control: the control of movements and communications, but in a decentralized fashion, depending on competing transnational networks, which immediately raises the question of access: who will have
the right of access to any given network to control or redistribute any given flow? What is left to consider for another discussion is the exact form of the relationship between this biopolitical security and two other, minority flow systems, whose reality effects are incredibly strong, and which seem simultaneously to sustain and threaten our new security: these are the flow of international finance and the clandestine flow of illegal trafficking, or, in other words, the flow of the market.