Alain Badiou, in his *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1989), remarks that the ‘properly ontological virtue’ of capital is to have delivered us from any belief in the One (1999: 37). Of course here he echoes Marx and Engels’s comments in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) on the desacralizing dynamic of the bourgeoisie, which ‘has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.’ (Marx & Engels 2000) Despite his well-known antagonism, we could also detect a reference here by Badiou to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) suggestion of the deterritorializing effects of capital that put into flux unities and solidities, posed at the ontological level. The ontological virtue of capital is, in this case, the way it confirms the virtue of ontology – that is to say, Badiou’s secularized ontology of multiplicity.

What concerns me today, however, is what I’d like to call the ontological vices of capitalism and how they impinge upon our thinking. By ‘vices’ I want to refer to the flipside of this process of desacralization, which was noted by Marx, in *Capital* (1867), in his reference to the theological subtleties and metaphysical niceties generated by the commodity form (Marx 2010).

Strictly speaking, we should note, that such vices cannot be simply split from the ontological virtue Badiou notes. The ‘icy waters’ of capitalist egoism that drown sentiment generate, as well, these metaphysical and theological consolations. In fact, what concerns me, in part, is the common tendency to split virtues and vices, by claiming only the ‘virtue’ of the deterritorializing power of capital. In one form this is what I have elsewhere referred to as ‘accelerationism’ – the belief not only in the disintegrative powers of capital, but also in the need to stoke and push further those powers to rupture the horizon of capital (Noys 2010: 5–9; Noys 2012). In fact, this position derives from Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion, in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), that the accelerating tendency of deterritorialization must be pushed further: ‘[n]ot to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to “accelerate the process”, as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven’t seen anything yet.’ (1983: 239–40). In what follows I want to suggest that such a splitting, between virtues and vices, or between deterritorialization and retrerritorialization, serves a particular political purpose in the articulation of ontology. I also want to suggest that it goes beyond this extreme accelerationist position to form a more general or common horizon, often articulated around the concept of ‘savage life’. This concept, deployed for critical effect, finds itself, I will argue, problematically bound-up with the theological vices of capital that it claims to disdain and exceed.

In regards to the theme of this conference, then, I am expressing a scepticism concerning the valorization of the ‘ontological’ and of the ‘ontological turn’. In this particular case I am referring to the danger of the ontologizing of life, but my doubts range further than that into the more general tendency to demand some or other ontological point of resistance that can bend, shape, or resist the solvent effects of capital. So, we have an irony in which the solvent effects of capital are at once welcomed, as desacralizing, and resisted, in the name of some ontologically weighty point. To put it simply, I want to say that the turn to ontology speaks to the moment of the recognition of the ontology of capital, but it does so in a desire to exceed or evade the ontology of capital. In this way, we could say, we find an ‘ontological clash’ – between the ontology of capital and these counter-ontologies. It is the terrain of ontology that becomes the site of the political. What I am suggesting is a withdrawal from the appeal to the ontological as ‘cure’ to the disease of capitalist ontology, and a reflection on the problem of ontology as it is posed in the horizon of capital. Therefore, what I say will not seem very
philosophical, perhaps, because it suggests suspending the claims to ontology that are often, today, seen as the sign of the philosopher. I am not proposing an ontology, in short. Rather, I want to suggest the necessity for looking more closely politically at the very appeal to, and appeal of, ontology in our present moment.

**Ontology of Annihilation**

To begin, I want to turn to the concept of ‘savage life’ to frame the dispute concerning ontology. To track this concept, and the political vitalisms it licenses, I want to refer to an enigmatic moment in *The Order of Things* (1966), where Michel Foucault notes that in nineteenth-century biological thought ‘life becomes a fundamental force’: one of movement opposed to immobility, time to space, and the secret wish to the visible expression (1974: 303). Foucault names this a ‘savage ontology of life’ (1974: 303, trans. mod.; see also Tarizzo 2011). Part of the power of this ‘savage ontology’ lies in the fact that its mobility and excess allows it to encompass and fold within itself all that which would seem opposed to life. In this ontology Being and non-Being, Life and Death, Positivity and Negativity, are melded together. The pulsing force of life is not one that simply invigorates and instantiates forms, but also saps all forms from within, eroding and destroying them. Contrary to the usual alignment of life with growth and development, Foucault argues that it is an ‘ontology of annihilation’ that overturns and revolutionizes everything it confronts (1974: 303). Therefore, when we encounter ‘savage life’ we encounter a discourse without a limit, a discourse at once radically negative as well as radically affirmative.

In particular, Foucault notes that ‘savage life’ is contrary to the discourse of political economy, because it overturns the concepts on which political economy relies: need, limit, and individuality. Life is an infinite duration, a rupture, the dissipation of consciousness, and so departs from a discourse of political economy. What we can see here is life opposed to all the illusions of consciousness, all the limits of economy, and all the reified and static moments of power (*Potere*), in the name of the Power of life (*Potenza*). We can note that this ontology of life incorporates negativity as a radical power of erosion. Life is not opposed to death, or to destruction or negativity, but already operates through affirming radicalized negativity.

What is difficult to judge is how far Foucault is posing this discourse as an analytic object, or endorsing it. This is particularly true as his characterization of this ‘savage ontology’ carries unmistakable echoes of the work of his then friend Gilles Deleuze. Deleuze’s project, framed in Nietzschean and Bergsonian forms, could be taken as a radicalization of this strain of nineteenth-century thought, or it may be that Foucault is surreptitiously disputing the originality of Deleuze’s intervention. This ambivalent status of the ‘savage ontology’ is further reinforced by Foucault’s posing of it against the discourse of political economy. Again, is he endorsing this excess of the discourse of life over the limits of political economy, following from his remark in *The Order of Things* that: ‘Marxism exists in nineteenth-century thought like a fish in water: that is, it is unable to breathe anywhere else,’ (1974: 262) or is he merely offering an analytic reflection?

Evidence for endorsement can be found in the fact, drawn out by Joan Copjec, that in his essay on Binswanger, ‘Dream, Imagination and Existence’ (1954), Foucault endorsed Binswanger’s disjunction of life and history (Copjec 2012: 39). Copjec goes on to point out that we can read Foucault’s analysis of sexuality as the fatal operator of power that forces together and fuses life and history. In this way, using Foucault’s reworking of Binswanger, it forms a ‘mirage’ (Copjec 2012: 40). So, I think we can hint that this disjunction of life and history forms a more central part of Foucault’s thesis and, I would add, such a disjunction ‘empowers’ many contemporary political vitalisms. This is one reason why Foucault’s ‘savage ontology’ has such a fecund future.

This can explain why these contemporary political vitalisms can draw on Foucault’s account of biopolitics, which suggests the complex interaction of power and resistance, the imbrication of life with power, and the difficulty of extracting life from the coils of power, and reverse the valence to suggest the overweening power of life. They ‘fill out’, or ontologize, the disjuncture Foucault posed between life and history. I am suggesting they do so by recourse to this ‘savage sense’ of life, that overturns and overflows our miring in power. In this way they constitute life as a macro-subject and reinstantiate the great dramas of refusal and revolution that Foucault had claimed were a
thing of the past. The splitting or ambiguity of Foucault’s remarks on life (which reflect and refract the splitting of life and history), which nowhere (as far as I know) try to coordinate life as savage ontology and life as biopolitics, are replicated in the present moment. Foucault has bequeathed us a problem.

I am suggesting that we might align Foucault’s account of biopolitics with the biopolitical capture of human beings – with life as site of radical subjection most resonantly conceptualized in Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) account of ‘bare life’. While this seems to threaten to leave life confined in the iron-cage of power, the turn to life as a savage ontology allows the cage bare to be broken. In the case of Agamben this accounts for the seemingly unlikely fact that a discourse that appears so radically pessimistic also licenses some of the most activist discourses of the present moment – notably in the articulations of The Invisible Committee. I want to suggest that these two moments go together – life as site of subjection and life as site of subjectivation. The ontologies of life constantly turn on producing a reversal from the site of subjection to the site of saving subjectivation.

**Insurrectional life**

In a 2009 pamphlet issued out of the student occupations in New York we find just this Agambenian invocation of life as a savage power of separation. The pamphlet appeals to ‘a form of life which no reason can govern’ (2009, IX), and closes with the assertion that: ‘Our task, impossible, is to seize time itself and liquefy its contents, emptying its emptiness and refilling it with the life that is banned from appearing.’ (2009, XI) This Agambenian radicalism draws on the Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection* (2007), which also codes insurrection in vitalist terms. They remark that ‘a real demonstration has to be “wild”’ (84), and figure the origin of insurrectional desire in ‘a vital impulse’ (10). The desert of the present is predicated on the biopolitical management of life that destroys or channels these ‘vital impulses,’ denying the disruptive and excessive effects of negativity that refuses all limits and constraints.

The unlikely thing is that Foucault and Agamben, both generally renowned for their asceticism, become the means to endorse an insurrectional ontology of life. I might just remark that Foucault, in his notorious texts on the Iranian revolution, also ventured an insurrectional ontology predicated on a spiritual politics that operated, precisely, by risking life utterly. I’d suggest that this fairly rare moment of political enthusiasm by Foucault, we could also mention his interview discussing political justice with the Maoists of *Gauche Proletarienne*, departs from the consideration of the miring of life in power to invoke a radical force of life indifferent to any limits. Alberto Toscano also drew my attention to the fact that his moment of what I would call ‘biopolitical populism’ came at the moment that Foucault was devoting his lectures to a consideration of the political rationality of neoliberalism (Foucault 2008). Again, what we might trace here is the disjunctive relation of life and history that seems to haunt Foucault’s work.

Foucault prefigures this reversible value of life, which oscillates between subjection and excess. Although not relying directly on this theoretical articulation we could notice how many formulation of insurrectional anarchism – that ‘strain’ (to use an appropriately viral and violent term) of anarchism that dictates the rejection of existing organisations, uncompromising negation, and the immediate destruction of all external forms of power and control in violent insurrection – draw on a similar reversal. When the anonymous author or authors of the pamphlet *At Daggers Drawn* (1998) suggest that our own lives are ‘the authentic place of the social war’ (2001: 5), that ‘insurrection … is the unknown bursting into life [the] life of all,’ (2001: 36), and that ‘subversion is a game of wild, barbarous forces,’ (2001: 11) they stand in this lineage.

As I noted in the case of Foucault the galvanizing power of this discourse lies in its *indifference* to the ontology of capital. To return *At Daggers Drawn*, it notes that Bakunin’s concept of rebellion as ‘[*]he unleashing of all evil passions*’ is bound to make ‘the cold analysts of the historical movements of capital smile’ (2001: 10). The critique of such savage ontologies often takes for vices what they regard as virtues. The anti-strategic immediacy of violent opposition, the stress on intermittent and unrepresentable forms of struggle, the unyielding hostility to all existent political forms, the voluntarism of combat, the reliance on processes of contagion and ‘resonance’ of attacks, are all premised on the refusal of representational compromises and an unyielding binarism of life versus power. To chide these forms with a lack of strategy, of mediation, of structural awareness, of negotiation,
and persistence, seems to miss the point.

This is the intractability of vitalism, as its very volatility, promiscuity and dispersion leaves little space left for any critique to take place. Max Horkheimer, in a 1934 essay, accepted the element of protest against reification at work in vitalism, but was critical of its elimination of history, evasion of the material, and irrationalism (Horkheimer 2005). Again, contemporary vitalisms embrace these exact points of criticism. If history is co-extensive with Capital and Empire, the ‘single catastrophe’ to use Benjamin’s oft-quoted phrase, then the elimination of history is the only way to found the novelty of the new. The crisis of capitalism and the exhaustion of left or social democratic forms is taken as a given and as the sign of the release of the repressed force of life. In similar fashion the material only incarnates the practico-inert slumped into the frozen stasis of the commodity form. The alternative ‘materialities’ of life – objects, networks, complexity, et al. – are the only hope against the dead matter of the present. This is what Badiou, in Logics of Worlds (2006), calls ‘democratic materialism’. Finally, irrationalism is to be welcomed against the sterile rationalisms of planning and order that are taken to encompass everything from state socialism to neo-liberalism.

Limits of Life

That said, at the risk of playing the ‘cold analyst’, I do want to critique the counter-ontology of ‘savage life’. First, I want to set out a number of criticisms directly before turning to an account of how ‘savage life’ is generated out of the ontology of capital. My criticisms are in no particular order, and are somewhat ‘telegraphic’, for which I apologize.

First, the discourse of ‘savage life’ incarnates a theological politics of redemption and reversal. This is what I have taken to calling a ‘Christological vitalism’, in that Christ’s passion is used as the figure of reversal from the destitute and abject body of suffering into the redeemed and saved body. There is some irony in the choice of the most dialectical of figures to articulate an anti-dialectical immediacy and reversal. What we can say is that the political vitalisms of ‘savage life’ make use of reversal instead of dialectics. Immediacy lies in the turn.

Second, Donna V. Jones has pointed out that despite vitalism posing itself as an affirmative and primary force it in fact always functions as a ‘reactive banner’, and should be ‘defined less affirmatively than as the negation of its own negation – the mechanical, machinic, and the mechanicist.’ (2012: 28) Life does not come first, but rather has to be constantly extracted and separated from the mechanical, the deathly, and the forces of state and capital. This accounts, I think, for the hostility of vitalism for forms of critique, which it condemns as a discourse of resentment. The stridency of vitalism’s condemnation of critique is a sign of its proximity to critique, and to the fact that its own ‘negation of negation’ so easily replaces critique. In the relation of vitalism and critique we have a case of what Freud called the ‘narcissism of small differences’.

Third, ‘savage life’ articulates a biopolitical populism. I have already hinted at this in my discussion of Foucault. To be more precise, invocations of life in this force pose it as a dispersed and oppositional form, in a binary between ‘Life’ and ‘Power’. This is a politics of the bloc, in the wake of the general weakening, if not collapse, of traditional ‘left’ forms (parties, unions, etc.). Populism turns on the opposition of life, which includes potentially nearly all, and power, i.e., the 99% versus the 1%. Again, there is no doubt this has a galvanizing effect in replacing meditations on the indirect despots of capital with an immediate and immanent struggle. The difficulty comes in the very channelling and organisation of this force of life, which seems to emerge, coalesce, and dissipate. This, we might say, is the revenge of mediation denied.

This binarism of ‘savage life’ is what also makes it an ethical discourse, to make my fourth criticism. The ethics is of measuring up to life, as a withdrawn and intractable force against which one is always found wanting. Of course, ethics is largely in favour at the moment, so to say that the discourse of ‘savage life’ is ethical hardly seems a criticism. I mean this as a criticism as I want to recall Fredric Jameson’s statement:

In our time, ethics, wherever it makes it reappearance, may be taken as the sign of an intent to mystify, and in particular to replace the more complex and ambivalent judgements of a more properly political and dialectical perspective with the more comfortable simplifications of a binary myth.
This concept of ‘binary myth’ usefully draws together my criticisms, in terms of the theological, reactive, populist, and ethical nature of ‘savage life’.

‘Ovidian Transformations’
To flesh out these criticisms I want to consider this savage ontology of life in terms of what Joshua Clover calls the ‘Ovidian transformation’ of living labour into value (2012: 108). The theological vices of capitalist ontology generate, in this transformation, the theological vices of the political vitalisms of ‘savage life’. The result, in the style of Baudrillard, is a ‘mirror of vitalism’, in which the invocations of the superior ontological powers of life mirror capital’s own fantasy of life as exterior point that can constantly generate value. The tendency to split apart life and capital does not save life from capital, but replicates the structural separation of production and reproduction on which capital depends. Rather than tracking life from reproduction into the ‘hidden abode of production’ the vitalisms of ‘savage life’ take life as this separated force.

Joshua Delpech-Ramey points out that:
Capitalist inequity thus survives on the illusion that there is something beyond its current regime, its current distribution. This fantasy of an ‘outside’ of capital enables capital to function: it lets us ignore or look past what it is actually doing, in the hope that something better will come along, in the hope that the system will eventually have to bend to our ‘natural’ needs and desires. (2007: 92)

Obviously I am suggesting that the role of that ‘something’ is played by life, in this case. Life offers an ‘outside’ that is very much ‘inside’ capital, so that it can play the political role of separation, or being torn away from capital – hence its political value.

In order to replace of this binary myth I am suggesting that we consider life more as site of contradiction than antinomy. The continuing vampiric extraction of value from life by capital does not, I am suggesting, imply a simple opposition between life and capital.

It is an irony that although the theorization of biopolitics depends on the work of Michel Foucault all too often it forgets his analysis of the capillary and molecular forms of domination, as we already noted. In the case of Marx too, notion of capitalism as, ‘posing its presuppositions’, including positing labour-power as the perpetual source of value (Marx 1973: 298), suggests a simple reversal is not sufficient. The notion of capital as discardable integument, under which pulse the excessive and savage powers of life, is a result of affirming the very form of value that structures capitalism.

Emanuele Leonardi notes that this ‘parasitical’ model of capitalism ‘delineate[s] a mystical profile of social cooperation, an image of the multitude as good in itself, as intrinsically innocent.’ (2010: 260) This figuration of innocence becomes the property of life, thereby resistant to any empirical falling away from virtue. The potential of life is a place-holder for a radicalism that is savage but immune from contamination by capital. Contrary to his model, Leonardi derives an analysis from Gilbert Simondon that suggests capitalism is a ‘dynamic regime of superimpositions’, which is ‘aimed at selecting subjective trajectories “potentially” functional to capitalist valorization.’ (2010: 259) This captures the way in which capitalism can ‘format’ at the level of potential, and does not merely operate as an external ‘apparatus of capture’, to use a formulation from Deleuze and Guattari that is prevalent and popular today.

This can also be grasped through the discourse of psychoanalysis. Alenka Zupančič (2006) has argued that capitalism can be characterized as a social form that takes what is usually regarded as the entropic waste of enjoyment (jouissance) and uses that as a source of value. It is the very excess of Life over life that generates the remainder, the ‘pound of flesh’, that is converted into value. The result is constant accumulation and endless movement; in capitalism no waste goes to waste. This does not mean that capitalism it is not the most wasteful social system, but that this waste can always be redeployed to generate further value. In this situation the entropic element is detached from its own entropy, its own negativity, and exploited as value. My argument is that contemporary political vitalisms mimic this form of operation that capitalism performs on life. A life lived in which all entropy is treated as value-generating is a life with no remainder or negativity, or only remainders and negativity that can become further
sources of value. This is a life fully saturated, a situation in which the ‘powers’ of life become the forms of value. Political vitalisms either, à la Agamben, try to insert negativity as the ‘drag’ or inertia of this process that can be reversed into political value or, à la ‘affirmative biopolitics’, take a splitting of life \textit{qua} excess from life as operator of power. In both cases they too try to turn entropy into value, and occlude the fact (as Zupančič notes) that power and resistance converge in the occlusion of the ‘master signifier’. Capitalist despotism is an ‘indirect’ despotism that rules in the occlusion of the direct violence (most of the time), making us engage in our own conversion of the entropic into value.

Marx (2010) remarks, ‘capital has one single life impulse [\textit{Lebenstrieb}], the tendency to create value and surplus-value, to make its constant factor, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus-labour.’ While the discourse of political vitalism couches itself as a detachment from capital and history, it in fact replicates the operation by which capitalism operates as a form of vitalism. This is evident in Marx’s claim, in the \textit{Grundrisse} (1857–61), that:

\begin{quote}
[those who demonstrate that the productive force ascribed to capital is a displacement, a transposition of the productive force of labour, forget precisely that capital itself is essentially this displacement, this transposition, and that wage labour as such presupposes capital, so that, from its standpoint as well, capital is this transubstantiation, the necessary process of positing its own powers as alien to the worker. (Marx 1973: 308)]
\end{quote}

My suggestion is that the political vitalisms produce just such a displacement or transubstantiation, and that in their oscillation over the valence of life they replicate Marx’s assertion that under capitalism labour is experienced as both the source of wealth and the denuded experience of ‘absolute poverty’ (1973: 296). The very contradictory experience of life – torn between passivity and activity, despair and joy, conformity and revolt – speaks not simply to a problem of political activation, but to its contradictory place within the social order of capitalism.

This is not to exchange indeterminacy and contingency for determination and necessity. Instead it is to suggest that the problem of capitalism is not so easily disposed of through the recourse to life. The difficulty will then be to grasp, analyse, and act from and against these effects of abandonment to ‘wageless life’ (Denning 2010), without simply valorizing them as the sites of life freed from the shibboleths of ‘leftism’ and ‘labour’. The particular ‘freedom’ is, in fact, another form of subjection, in which the reproduction of life is displaced into self-reproduction outside the ‘securities’ of the State. What is important, I think, is not to mistranslate situations of relative powerlessness into situations of encrypted or hidden powers. Rather than this fundamentally theological, or more precisely Christian, discourse of reversal and ‘saving’ – in which the most extreme state of destitution is the path to glory – we need a more nuanced strategic thinking that does not simply repeat the mantra of the ‘excess’ of life and the immanence and imminence of insurrection. The theology of life replicates the theology of labour, trying to de-transubstantiate the labour capital transubstantiates into value but only to re-transubstantiate it into a new source of value. In comparison to the ‘energizing’ certainties of insurrection and the dissolving power of life a critical discourse of analysis and strategy can only appear compromising and compromised; and yet, the stubborn persistence of life as biopolitical component of capital does not seem to have responded to the invocation of desire and reversal.

\textbf{Bibliography}


