

Domesticating the Thermal: Sense of Warmth as the Object of Biopolitics

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Foucauldian biopolitics overall remain “bound to the notion of an integral body” (Lemke 2011, 94); however, in the modern context, the body politics do not have just one singular subject of control. The body has become fragmented and peripheral, extended to the point of objectification and domestication of nature (Macauley 2010), allowing us to believe that humans can own not just the material, physical nature but even the natural processes like fire (encaging it within furnaces, ovens and lava lamps). Nature has become another “field of difference” (Haraway 1991, 162), which somehow is “both a resource and a sacral ground” (Sauka 2023, 39). Nature, on the one hand, is owned and reproduced, and, on the other, neglected and treated like a landfill, leading to a loss of connection with the nonhuman – the more-than-human agencies that sustain life (Hird 2012). The nonhuman – more than non-human – becomes an essential aspect of sustaining humanity. However, because we try owning “nature” and exercising power over it, humans have disconnected from both nature and the selfhood.

Where the thermal begins?

Warmth – whether naturally emitted by sun, geysers, wildfires and sirocco winds or the industrialized material sources such as furnaces, heaters, radiators, and stoves – represents more than comfort. Ancient fire symbolizes gathering, togetherness and warmth of a community (Medlin & Zajchowski 2023, 1150), whilst the modern fire represents production, function and processualism of life (Pisters, 2023; Starosielski, 2021). Warmth, fire and heat manifests through all stages of life, accompanied by various thermal conditions and objects (henceforth referred to as the thermal) that ensure and generate vitality and life (Walker, 2020, 53). The thermal is also not exclusive to surrounding environments, human bodies perform thermoregulation all the time, heating and cooling oneself, however this thermal “is neither the property of objects nor subjects; [it] is not contained in matter” (McHugh & Kitson, 2018, 158). The thermal is everywhere, yet also not entirely fixed, in a sense, the thermal is more likely an action, relations between bodies and things, nature and human (Beregow, 2019), a movement between

different subjects, both human and the more-than-human agencies.

However, the thermal does not exist as an interdependent subject; instead, it is governed by humans who place themselves at the center of all that is natural, and non-human. Consequently, a new epoch can be defined by the Anthropocene, where humanity perceives it as their responsibility to hold the control over the inhuman aspects of the world, resulting into “interventions into matter and life precipitate deadly systemic breakdowns” (Clark, 2011, 30), affecting the thermal, within the realm of biopolitics. In biopolitical terms, power operates through the management of life; it “is the right to take life or let live” (Foucault, 2003, 241). Biopower seeks to manage life through death, which is always on the horizon. This desire to control death reflects humanity’s quest to preserve life. However, attempting to manage death inherently involves striving to guarantee survival, which in order means that manipulating nature and all that exists as inhuman is just another tool. In this context, warmth emerges as the most vital source of life that should be owned and controlled, to an extent that “we seek to surround ourselves with supplementary fires (the engines that transport us, the central heating systems that keep us warm, the electrical grid that connects us to information technologies) from which we expect to receive a compensation for the weakness of our vitality” (Marder, 2020, 97). The control of the thermal becomes an extension of the human’s own body, domesticated and entangled in arms wide open. In the process of biopower also is born the thermopower – “ways that temperature management defines subjects, produces objects, and locates both in grids of social and political organization” (Starosiel-ski, 2021, 7).

Through the lens of Foucauldian biopolitics and discourse analysis, the paper aims to illustrate how modern governance intervenes in the vital processes of life, simultaneously ingraining the Anthropocene even deeper in biopower structures. The main argument is – when humans attempt to control and domesticate elements and processes, such as the thermal, it leads to the exclusion of both nature and humanity. By owning the natural and controlling the thermal, the Anthropocene subject not only alienates self from nature but loses its own sense of self, forgetting that the lived body is always part of the thermal too.

The pursuit of thermal control and loss of harmony

The pursuit to understand and control the thermal has been a part of humanity’s objective since antiquity. Fire and heat were regarded as central elements world order system and the core of the life itself. For example, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, in fragment 28, describes fire as the exchange of all things and all things – of fire (Heraclitus, 2016, 18). Not only Heraclitus sought to identify the fundamental element of all things, but also located thermal as the source of life, i.e. cycle of birth and death. For Heraclitus fire resembled harmony and movement. Overall fire and light were the manifestations of life or cosmic fire “that illuminated and emitted life-giving warmth” (Marder, 2020, 32) and represented balance between nature and humans. However, another prominent idea is represented in the Greek myth of fire god Prometheus, who stole the fire from gods and gifted it to humanity, representing technological development (Segovia, 2021, 507). Consequently, the transfer of fire to humans not only speaks about advancement, but also about the instrumentalization of nature. Fire that once belonged to gods, was unreachable by humans, now became a tool, instrumental and controllable.

While instrumentalizing nature or its attributes does not negate the existence of material world, it does construct “nature” through a human-centric worldview. While ancient cultures viewed the relationship between nature and humans as harmonious, the Anthropocene worldview disrupts this interdependence and balance, creating a system hierarchy over material. This new era is evident through the “overuse and high visitation in natural environments” (Medlin & Zajchowski 2023, 1153), where humans claim the different environmental and material spaces as their own. Furthermore, this shift in perception of the world order turns nature into an object of politics, always under the influence of narratives, knowledge fields and power. In other words, nature becomes something constructed, not discovered (Harway, 1991, 106). And humanity becomes seemingly more independent and begins to view climate, nature and the environment as something that can be held and controlled (Matthews, 2021). Nature stops existing as something that can affect the surrounding environment and coexist with living beings, rather there no longer is independent nature.

However, claiming something, does not mean that it is owned, the biopower, even more the thermopower “is not granted to the individual; it is dispersed across the network” (Starosielski, 2021, 71) of society, climate and the thermal. Through this new worldview, “human connections to and continuity with the past” (Hourdequin, 2021, 64–65) risk becoming endangered and overly entangled in power dynamics, dispersing in the system themselves. In Foucauldian terms, what was once regarded as the external realm of nature, that which could have been controlled not imbued with human nature, is reconfigured as bios – another life to be managed. This reconfiguration becomes the essence of biopower or “a set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political

strategy, of a general strategy of power” (Foucault 2009, 1). Consequently, nature becomes intertwined with the biological characteristics of the Anthropocene that are scrutinized through a political lens, controlled and excluded or restricted to specific forms of existence.

The thermal and biopower

Viewing and engaging with the thermal dynamics within biopower structures that control life seemingly brings together the human and the nonhuman. However, the human attempt to strive for control and individuality also means denying one’s interconnectedness with nature and thermal processes (Whatmore, 2002, 157). As a result, humans do not see thermal energy as something that brings us into harmony with our surroundings and ourselves; rather, this connection is overlooked as just practical exercise of power over others.

The objectification and control of thermal and natural elements have “allowed humans to keep warm in the depths of winter. For Indo-European consciousness, the very thought of dwelling has been inseparable from the hearth burning at the center of a house” (Marder, 2020, 125). Consequently, what is overlooked is the fact that elements that produce heat and warmth are not only necessary for the sustainability of daily life, but also found the mentalities, social practices and collective identities. However, when those elements become governed by humans or further biopower to normalize, fixate and exclude that which is deemed unnecessary, unimportant (Foucault, 2003; Reeves & Peters, 2021), the thermal becomes another element of biopower, and controlled in terms of live or die. Material world, in this case, has no active role, and the natural has been taken over. Many different thermal practices – whether for keeping something

warm or cold – are now subject to the influence of instrumentation, leading to “building typologies that were isolated from the outside environment” (Bhowmik, 2019, 2).

The thermal becomes enclosed and limited to control life itself. Politics seize the fire, warmth, heating, making the thermal centralized result in affecting the extent to which humans can connect with thermal energies. No longer open fires, but enclosed, hidden heating systems, heating regulations and limited heating options that separate the link between nature and human even more (Von Platten, 2025). In Foucauldian terms, these enclosed, limited, controlled typologies and lived spaces illustrate how controlling the climate regulates bodies and behaviors and renders the instrumental aspect invisible.

Biopower normalizes and redirects not only the bodies and their energies, but also inhuman forces and processes, that strive for strict regulations and control (Clark, 2019, 10), making sure that nothing seems out of place, even if it means that something needs to be excluded from the sight. Within this biopolitical system, where vitality of life is prioritized, nature is now viewed solely as a dynamic social-ecological system (Zajchowski *et al.*, 2021), and human as part of it. Further on, humans are not independent in the Anthropocene worldview, but rather they are intrinsically subjected to the thermopower too. In fact, “[a]ll social practices (as conventionally understood) involve human bodies that, as already outlined, have a thermal ‘operating range’ within which they are able to readily function” (Oppermann & Walker, 2019, 135). It means controlling the thermal also influences human interactions with nature and actions to support their own advancement.

Exclusion and restrictions

Controlling heat and leveraging it for agricultural benefit or other aspects of life for a long time was an essential part of our daily cycles. For example, burning fallow lands used for crops or collecting hay for livestock was once considered a crucial part of life, as it helped clear and maintain fields, ensuring soil nutrition and renewal. However, due to new regimes and policies, advancements in technologies, the use of fire, which was once seen as a means of promoting soil health, along with other traditional practices, has mostly disappeared (Clark, 2011, 167). This disappearance is not only the result of environmental policies but also a strategy to impose order and control over the thermal and all that has become the bios – lived bodies. In many instances, burning fallow lands led to unexpected fires that spread beyond intended areas, causing damage to the surrounding regions and also causing pollution.

This made fire increasingly difficult to manage, turning it into a force that exceeded the limits of warmth and its beneficial role (Walker, 2020, 184–186). Fire became viewed as the “abject”, something that should be kept at a distance and categorized as dangerous or undesirable, yet still at the periphery of our lives (Olivier, 2007, 451; Kristeva, 1982). As technology offers the ability to control heat sources and fire, natural thermal conditions are often regarded as phenomena that were perceived as those to avoid. Thus, fire, in this context, is excluded as something harmful and without a beneficial value. And the practices surrounding thermal control started to disperse or were applied in areas where they did not directly impact critical infrastructure and the environment in the periphery of the biopower and human-lived-world. But exclusion of these practices also limits the human nature. Practices that previously ensured more social, care-oriented and unrestrained lived experiences (Von Platten

et al., 2019), now has become part of carelessness and dissolved naturalness. All that is left is the illusion that thermal can be controlled, forgetting that human is also part of this thermal literally and figuratively.

Therefore, by focusing solely on the “practical” aspects of the thermal, other factors are excluded from consideration. The thermal (either produced by nature or humans) becomes restricted. Everything becomes controlled and constrained to the extent that fire is replaced by alternative heat sources, and body temperatures should be kept in line, not too hot, not too cold, just enough to live and not die. However, even though, the thermal has become the subject of the thermopower and biopower, humans within this system are unable to address the risks of their carelessness, when dismissing the thermal which has always been the “engine for modern life as well as an immaterial affective reverie of destruction, transgression, sexuality, and a desire for life” (Pisters, 2023, 290).

As of result, green spaces are replaced and urban areas are deforested, summers in cities become increasingly unbearable, with the only sources of shade being buildings and billboards instead of trees. It seems that, because heat cannot be fully harnessed or controlled, the occurrence of heatwaves during the summer months is often avoided rather than acknowledged or accommodated with the natural means that impacted the heat at first hand. This also could be said about the spread of wastelands, and the pursuit of finding solutions to control pollution often overlooking the unnatural heat produced by these areas and means of discarding the waste. Responsibility for these actions is often neglected because the thermal cannot be fully owned or managed; instead, it is seen as something to be diminished. As the Anthropocene attempts to manage both human and nonhuman, nature itself becomes

merely material and instrumental, resulting in an environment that feels less natural and more socially constructed, illusory. And the humanity that tries to control nature either becomes toxic or a blessing to the surrounding environment (Sauka 2023, 40).

Conclusion

The human positions itself at the center of things and vitality, forgetting it also is subjected to the power it seems to think it hold. The biopower is not controlled, it is a system that already has taken charge of everything and everyone. Hence biopower not only excludes the abject and the thermal as independent occurrence but also limits and constrains humanity itself, preventing it from existing to its fullest potential, being connected with the nonhuman – processes and more-than-human world. This power has constructed new narratives, forms, ideas, and even new ways of living that are just ways of controlling the dying. Heat and thermal energy can therefore be even used to control the lives that are worthy and violate those that are deemed insignificant (Tschakert & Karthikeyan, 2025). Interestingly, when thermal energy is subjected to biopower, humans forget their own thermal nature. Producing heat and needing heat, humans are dependent on their surrounding environment. Hence in the attempts to instrumentalize and normalize nature, The Anthropocene creates a system that seeks to imprison that which is naturally evolving and changing – including the humans too. This approach presents a static image of life, suggesting that certain aspects can be taken or discarded, but not adapted or changed. However, just like the “heat is never still and never fully contained” (Oppermann & Walker 2019, 134), human nature and thermal energies are not static too. The changes in thermal do affect the fluctuations and thermal control of humans too. In other words, “there is no being-together with others that is not always

already an accommodation with a volatile materiality" (Clark 2011, 191). The desire for humans to see themselves as overseers of life creates a conflict, as true control over our experiences and the environment cannot be achieved without also exercising control over oneself. Ultimately, humans are always connected to the more-than-human world, however, being embedded in material and the thermal. The more humans try to control their surroundings, the more these become excluded, owned, dominated, or abjected, stripping humans of their vitality and humanity.

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