Philosophische Fakultät

Universität zu Köln • Englisches Seminar I

Sommersemester 2018

Prüfer: Prof. Dr. Berressem

Zweitprüfer: Prof. Dr. Heinz Antor

Titel der Arbeit:

"Vital massacres": Biopolitics in The *Purge*

Name: Wilmink

Vorname: Aaron

Matrikelnr.: 5588294

Studiengang: English Studies (2-Fach Bachelor)

Emailadresse: awilmink@smail.uni-koeln.de

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1) Introduction

> "Entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital." (Foucault 1978: 137)

In the first issue of the *Kölner Universitätsmagazin*, the history professor Dr. Gersmann expressed her admiration for Foucault:

> Michel Foucault. Dafür standen wir in eisiger Winterkälte gerne frühmorgens vor dem Collège de France an, um einen Platz im immer überfüllten Vorlesungssaal zu erhalten. Dafür hätten wir fast alles gegeben. Wenige Tage nach einer dieser Vorlesungen traf ich in der Bibliothèque Nationale Gott. (Gersmann 51)

This quote beautifully depicts the profound importance and influence Foucault had on contemporaries, and that he still exerts today. He spawned several fields of research and remains the "most cited single author in the humanities" (Kelly 1), in recent years scholars even tend to speak of a Foucault-Boom (cf. Lemke 2007: 16). His concept of biopower and biopolitics[1] has been receiving more and more attention (cf. Stingelin 7), not least because it is brought up in a context Foucault did not anticipate: Biotechnologies dissipated the border of the integral body (cf. Lemke 2013: 122), with genetic engineering raising questions of eugenics once again.[2] Several authors have argued that this influential use of biopolitics has increasingly "resulted in conceptual confusion rather than clarification" (Mills 82; similar Lemke 2007: 78). However, Foucault clearly was open to others using his set of analyses and taking it further: He describes his books as "invitations, as public gestures, for those who may want eventually to do the same thing or something like it" (quoted in Stoler 16f).

As I attended a course on biopolitics in 2015, I incidentally came across the *Purge*[3] franchise following a passion for horror films[4] and was intrigued by the clever dystopian concept that was played out in the first two films: a twelve-hour period once a year in which all crime is legal, which aims at reducing crime rates during the rest of the year. Consequently, following Foucault's invitation, I will argue in this paper that Foucault's conceptional connection of biopower and racism, and the political experiment of the *Purge* share a pivotal element: A positive nexus between "the right to kill and the assurance of life" (Stoler 84). The *Purge*'s government uses the night

[1] While Foucault uses hyphens to indicate these terms, the hyphens have "mostly been dropped in subsequent uses" (Kelly ix). Following that I too will omit the hyphens in this paper most of the time, unless in direct quotation or in an etymological sense.
[2] A detailed discussion of eugenics and biopolitics can be found in Lemke 2003.
[3] To differentiate between the first film and the franchise as a whole, I will refer to the first film with an italic article (*The Purge*) in contrast to the franchise of the *Purge*.
[4] I truly owe this to Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank.

to (re-)gain control over its population and to reshape the social fabric in order to achieve – from these politicians' point of view – a more desirable demographic structure. This involves global mechanisms aimed not on the individual body but on the social body as a whole, the whole population of the dystopian USA. The notion of the Purge-night and its realization in the films is thus in its nature fundamentally biopolitical.

Starting with briefly situating Foucault and his work (ch. 2), the theoretical fundament for the analysis of the films is introduced in ch. 3. This chapter traces the origins on an etymological and theoretical level and presents the core concept of biopolitics and biopower according to Foucault. Moreover, it describes the still unresolved questions which arise when working with Foucault's concept and how his successors tried to expand his theory. In ch. 4, the *Purge* franchise is described, its critical reception and how the concept of the Purge-night and its introduction is explained in the narrative. ch. 5 finally explores in detail how the *Purge* films follow a biopolitical conception.

The *Purge* films have received mixed reviews (cf. ch. 4.1) and while I will refer to all three films in this paper, the 2014 installment *The Purge: Anarchy* includes the most relevant developments for my thesis. I will also refer to the trailer of *The First Purge*, which is due to be released July 4 this year, but already gives away significant parts of the storyline.

In the last two decades, research on Foucault has not only been enriched with an abundance of secondary literature but also primary textual reference became much easier: While in the early 1990s, Foucault's term *biopower* could only be found in *A History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1978), more and more material has been edited off "scratchy cassette recordings at the Saulchoir library in Paris" (Stoler 57) with the help of the manuscripts of his lectures. Thus, the lecture of March 17 of his course *Society Must Be Defended* is now essential for the discussion of biopolitics. Similarly, many parts of *Security, Territory, Population* are valuable for an understanding of said concept. Unlike the title suggests, Foucault's lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics* do not entail basic details about biopolitics and biopower, but predominantly focus on neo-Liberalism, which, according to Foucault, should have been only the introduction:

> I WOULD LIKE TO [sic] assure you that, in spite of everything, I really did intend to talk about biopolitics, and then, things being what they are, I have ended up talking at length, and maybe for too long, about neo-liberalism [...]. (Foucault 2008: 185)

Furthermore, a useful source is the extensive collection of Foucault interviews, articles and similar public appearances, *Dits et ecrit*. The four-volume work has not been translated into English yet; however, there is a translation in German. After much of the center of *Governmentality Studies* shifted from the francophone to the anglophone world (cf. Lemke 2000: 34), Foucault-based research grew foremost in Germany in recent years (cf. Michel Senellart in Foucault 2007: 390f; Lemke 2007: 14); the German translation of *Dits et ecrits*, called *Schriften* mirrors this development of German research as English scholars still have to turn to the French original or read the German translation.

Likewise, in secondary literature significant contributions are German, for example the numerous works of Foucault expert Lemke, who is referenced by the editors of Foucault's lectures as an apt source and published preeminent overviews on biopolitics, for example *Biopolitik zur Einführung*. The compilation *Biopolitik und Rassismus*, edited by Martin Stingelin, which includes several essays following a conference on biopolitics offers new perspectives, including e.g. Sarasin's *Zweierlei Rassismus?* which breaks down the connection between biopolitics and racism more closely. In a discussion about biopolitics, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben should not be left out, whose Foucault-derivative *Homo Sacer* polarized the Foucauldians heavily; his conception of biopolitics, however, will not be the primary focus in this paper. Other important sources for my work include Stoler's *Race and the education of desire*, as well as the essay-collection *Biopower. Foucault And Beyond*, edited by Cisney Morar.

There is little secondary literature available on the *Purge* franchise apart from pure reviews of the films. Essays on the juridical aspect of the Purge (Hausmann 2014) or a comparision of dystopical and apocalypse films including *The Purge* (Christopher 2014) are only partly relevant for this paper.

While a few years ago the terms biopower and biopolitics were solely used by experts, the usage has spread from scientific to broad political usage, including the usage by "Kritiker des biotechnologischen Fortschritts, aber auch dessen Befürworter, erklärte Rassisten wie bekennende Marxisten" (Lemke 2013: 9). Lemke also emphasizes how the different approaches on biopolitics continue, reify and enliven Foucault's concept (Lemke 2013: 153). This paper is intended to be another contribution to the application of the concept of biopolitics.

2) Situating Foucault

Although Foucault's concept of biopolitics and biopower spawned an abundance of secondary literature, some Foucault experts remark that the concept was not actually explored in depth by Foucault himself (e.g. Patton 107) and was not the center of his work. In order to contextualize how Foucault approached biopolitics, this chapter aims at briefly situating Foucault and his work.

Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984) was born into the French establishment, "a child of the professional middle class" (Kelly 4) and received the "most elite undergraduate" (ibid.) education possible, attending Ecole normale supérieure. After studying philosophy and psychology and working on various teaching jobs, including lecturing at the Universities of Uppsala, Tunis and Vincennes, he was appointed professor for the chair of the *History of Systems of Thought* at the prestigious Collège de France in 1970. The lectures he was obliged to give were soon well-attended, although Foucault himself wished to include more interaction and less spectacle, up to the point that he felt stage fright prior to the lectures (cf. Foucault 2002: 976) and "total solitude" (quoted in Foucault 2008: xiv) after he finished the lecture. He lamented that a "genuine discussion" (ibid.) was in that way impossible.

Foucault describes his method of researching rather as somewhat maverick: "I am like the crawfish and advance sideways" (Foucault 2008: 78). Describing how he writes books, he remarks:

> Wenn ich ein Buch schreiben sollte, um das mitzuteilen, was ich schon gedacht habe, ehe ich es zu schreiben begann, hätte ich niemals die Courage, es in Angriff zu nehmen. Ich schreibe nur, weil ich noch nicht genau weiß, was ich von dem halten soll, was mich so sehr beschäftigt. (Foucault 2005: 52)

He was also inconsistent about the contiguity of his works among themselves. Stoler traces different statements of Foucault: "[...] in one place he refers to volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* as a 'twin project' with *Madness and Civilization* and elsewhere as a 'sequel' to *Discipline and Punish*" (Stoler x). Hence when working with Foucault's definition of biopolitics, it is important to keep in mind that Foucault occasionally jumps back and forth in his research focus.

Moreover, following numerous interviews and articles of *Dits et ecrits*, Foucault tends to respond very sensitively to criticism. Stoler explains that "the 'quiet' reception of [The History of Sexuality] Vol. 1 by some, and its more scathing dismissal by others, the latter reflected in extremis by Baudrillard's 1977 piece *Forget Foucault*" (Stoler 25) might have led to a "period of crisis" (ibid.), and subsequently to a change

in Foucault's plans for his course on biopolitics.[5] Whereas Foucault occasionally reacted to critics in a withering tone, e.g. in a riposte to Pelorson, whom Foucault attributes "eine großartige Inkompetenz" (Foucault 2002: 260), he also reacted with self-doubts, impressionably seen in the first lecture of *Society must be defended*:

> That I've just about had enough [...] I realize that there were more and more drawbacks, for both you and me. Lines of research that were very closely interrelated but that never added up to a coherent body of work, that had no continuity. We are making no progress, and it's all leading nowhere. It's all repetitive, and it doesn't add up. [...] perhaps we're not saying anything at all. (Foucault 2004: 3f)

He furthermore considered the reaction of the students and attendants of his lectures as an evaluation of his work, claiming that if they "don't have an interested look, I am very sad, you know" (Foucault 2004: xvi). Thus, the discontinuity in Foucault's use of the concept of biopolitics could be interpreted as being the result of different factors: On the one hand his focus shifted to the term of 'governmentality', which, according to some authors, is only "der Name einer neuen analytischen Perspektive auf die Biopolitik" (Muhle 255; see also Kelly 108); on the other hand, the reception might have led Foucault to discontinue the usage of the term biopolitics. However, he "certainly never actually renounced" (Kelly 108) the term or the concept and continued to use it scatteredly in interviews up until 1983 (Foucault 2005: 467).

Foucault did not like labels and repeatedly dissociated himself from them, most prominently of being a structuralist: "Ich habe auch nie behauptet, Strukturalist zu sein. Im Gegenteil. Seit Jahren erkläre ich immer wieder, dass ich kein Strukturalist bin" (Foucault 2002: 255). Moreover, his dismissals include being a scientist (Foucault 2005: 49), a historian, a novelist, an artist (ibid., 50), a social researcher (ibid. 84) a theorist (ibid. 52) and a philosopher (ibid. 53). He claimed to be an experimenter, if anything at all (ibid. 52).

Those who do praise Foucault as an exceptional philosopher occasionally blank out that Foucault drew substantially from other influential theorists and was influenced by the Annales-School, by Durkheim, Weber, Foucault's former tutor Althusser and most relevantly for his concept of biopolitics, by Arendt (cf. Lemke 2007: 45). Accordingly, Lemke finds fault in some portrayals of Foucault's achievements:

> In vielen Arbeiten erscheint Foucault als eine singuläre intellektuelle Figur und als sozialwissenschaftlicher Klassiker, der eine völlig neue Theorie der Macht vorgelegt

[5] Foucault comments on his intentions: "I thought I could do a course on biopolitics this year" (Foucault 2008: 21), and in the course summary he writes: "THIS YEAR'S COURSE ENDED up being devoted entirely to what should have been only its introduction" (ibid.317).

> habe. Ausgeblendet bleibt auf diese Weise die historiographische, philosophische und soziologische Tradition, an die Foucault anknüpft. (Lemke 2007: 15f)

Others who criticize Foucault point out that Foucault was sporadically imprecise or incorrect when describing historical processes as for example Foucault's assessment of Darwinism (Sarasin 72) in the discussion about racism, while Stoler invokes "not [to] quibble over dates" (5) in response to historians who denounce Foucault's work as "hopelessly wrong" (ibid.). Ninnis classifies some of Foucault's remarks on Freud as "simply wrong" (53) and incomplete, for example as he never mentions the unconsciousness, a central aspect of Freud's work.

Eventually, Foucault was not able to further expand upon the topic of biopower further: In a 1983 interview, he still expresses the plan to write a genealogy of biopower (cf. Foucault 2005: 467). In 1984, however, he dies as one of the first prominent victims of an AIDS-related illness (cf. Kelly 4), after just having published Part two and three of *History of Sexuality*. The fourth volume, *Confessions of the Flesh*, was only just published February this year, albeit Foucault originally not wanting any posthumous publications – although he already finished writing the fourth volume before he died. After all, Foucault was running out of time, as he resignedly consternates in the concluding words of his last lecture, on 28 March 1984: "But listen, I had more things to say about the general framework of these analyses. But it is too late now. So, thank you" (Quoted in Ninnis P. 62).

3) The Concept of Biopolitics

3.1) Up Until Foucault: Genealogy of the Term

Neither one of Foucault's neologism – 'governmentality' and 'biopower' – were entirely new concepts or terms (cf. Lemke 2007: 14). Several Foucault scholars point out that 'biopolitics' or similar related terms were used prior to Foucault taking it up. Most secondary literature suggests that the Swedish political scientist and professor of the University of Uppsala, Rudolph Kjellen (1864 - 1922), introduced the term biopolitics in 1911 (Fiaccadori 154, quoting Esposito) or 1920:

> Angesichts dieser das Leben selbst kennzeichnenden Spannung [...] ist bei mir die Neigung erwacht, diese Disziplin nach der besonderen Wissenschaft des Lebens, der Biologie, Biopolitik zu taufen; (...) Im Bürgerkrieg der sozialen Gruppen erkennt man nur allzu deutlich die Rücksichtslosigkeit des Lebenskampfes um Dasein und Wachstum wieder, während man zugleich innerhalb der Gruppen ein kräftiges Zusammenarbeiten für das Dasein feststellen kann. (Kjellen quoted in Lemke 2013: 20)

In Kjellen's conception, a national state resembles a living individual, only incomparably larger. Kjellen also included the element of survival of competing social groups in his description. Gunneflo contradictorily traces Kjellen's first use back to 1905 (Gunneflo), in Kjellen's two-volume work called *The Great Powers*. Bertani considers the French psychiatrist Éduard Toulouse (1865 - 1947) the first scholar to introduce biology into politics with his term "Biokratie"[6] (Bertani 234), Agamben points out Karl Löwith who defined the character of totalitarian states as "Politisierung des Lebens" (quoted in Agamben 128). Following that, the 1920s spawned several German authors who examined the state mechanism from an organicistic or naturalistic perspective (cf. Lemke 2007: 14), namely Binding 1920, Dennert 1922, Hahn 1926 (cf. ibid.). Sarasin quotes the Bavarian statistician Friedrich Burgdörfer who writes of "biopolitischer Grenzkampf" in 1932 (quoted in Sarasin 77). After Hitler's national-socialists largely discredited the term for scientific discussion through their appropriation, it was revived in the 1960s particularly in the Anglo-American political sciences (cf. Lemke 2007: 14), before Foucault partly redefined the usage of the terms biopolitics and biopower in the 1970s.

Foucault himself claims in *Security, Territory, Population* that with "no doubt" (Foucault 2007: 22) Jean-Baptiste Moheau's *Recherches sur la population* from 1778 defines the author as the "first great theorist of what we could call biopolitics, bio-power" (ibid.). Moheau, according to Foucault, described a new political technique which situates "the target of intervention for power" (ibid.) on the "notion of milieu", connects it to statistical references such as the birth rate and thus describes the population functioning "also [...] as a species" (ibid.). Lemke agrees in that "'Gärtner-Züchter-Chirurgen-Ambitionen' des Staates" (2013: 25, quoting Baumann) concerning the population can be traced back at least to the 18th century, long before social Darwinism came into vogue. Conceptually, Foucault substantially drew from Hannah Arendt's influential *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which she speaks of the "liquidation of classes" (Arendt 1973: 322), and maintains, as Oksala puts it, "that the political realm in Modernity [sic] has become more and more preoccupied with the management of biological life" (29).

In the Foucault-universe the term of biopolitics first surfaced in 1974 in one of his lectures (traced in Lemke 2007: 49f) before a larger, more complex disquisition of it was introduced in 1976: Foucault devoted the last chapter of his book *The History of*

[6] Found in a German translation of Bertani's Italian preface of *Birth of the Clinic,* writing about a French psychiatrist.

Sexuality Vol. 1, Part V to *The Right of Death and Power over Life*, as well as the last lecture of *Society must be defended* on March 17, 1976 to the introduction of biopolitics. He also presented a condensed version of his concept in a guest lecture at the arts faculty of the University of Bahia, transcribed under the title "Die Maschen der Macht" (Foucault 2005: 234ff.). Furthermore, he briefly also called this type of power "Sóma-Macht" (Foucault 2003: 302), following the ancient Greek word (σῶμα) meaning body/person while also – in a biological sense – referring to the entirety of cells in an organism.

Although Foucault was not the first and not the last to talk about biopolitics or biopower, Lemke claims that it still marks a caesura in that Foucault was the first to develop a relational and historical term of biopoltics (Lemke 2013: 13) in contrast to a "naturalistische[n] und politizistische[n] Lesart" (ibid.) and thus reinterpreting the term: "In dieser Hinsicht bezeichnet [Foucaults] Biopolitik eine spezifisch moderne Form der Machtausübung" (ibid. 47). After having explored the different etymological references and historical definition up until Foucault, the next chapter will focus on the conceptual and thematic level of biopower and biopolitics as discussed in Foucault's work.

3.2) Concept

Biopolitics is at its core the consideration of biology and more specifically the inclusion and administering of life in the political realm:

> The biological came under State control, that there was at least a certain tendency that leads to what might be termed State control of the biological. (Foucault 2004: 240)

This concept includes two major aspects of biopower, a regulatory mechanism and a disciplinary power, and epitomized a replacement of the traditional sovereign power. For Foucault, biopolitics constitutes furthermore the premise for modern institutional state racism. The change in political reasoning is often condensed into the antagonisms of the biopolitical power to "make live and let die" (ibid. 241) and the traditional sovereign power to "take life or let live" (ibid.). However, as Foucault also elucidates, the functioning of this change from one form of power to another and their interrelation are more complicated and not as easily distinguishable as this conceptual pairing suggests - and most importantly, not as clear-cut.

Introducing his concept, Foucault refers to several types of power, starting with the traditional power of a monarch, the sovereign power. In order to outline the transition from this power to a modern type of power, Foucault describes two related

subtypes of power in *Security, Territory, Population*. These three forms of power provide the cornerstone for his turn to biopower, the concept of population and the inherent racism of the system of biopolitics.

3.2.1) Traditional Concepts of Powers: Sovereign power, pastorate, coup d'État

The sovereign power of a monarch functions mainly through deduction:

> Perhaps this juridical form must be referred to a historical type of society in which power was exercised mainly as a means of deduction (prélèvement), a subtraction mechanism, a right to appropriate a portion of the wealth, a tax of products, goods and services, labor and blood, levied on the subjects. Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it. (Foucault 1978: 136)

This seizure includes most prominently taxes (e.g. in form of tithing), ordering subjects to fight in protection of the monarch and ultimately the sentence of death for subjects who threatened or challenged the regality of the monarch. Contested by another sovereign power, the monarch could expose the life of his subjects (e.g. in a war), without "directly proposing their death" (ibid. 135). The power over life and death was in this way "conditioned by the defense of the sovereign" (ibid. 135) to secure his or her own persisting. This power juridically follows the ancient Roman power of *patria potestas*, which placed the lives of a Roman family, including children and slaves, into the hands of the family's patriarch, the father. He could therefore also 'dispose of' the lives he deemed necessary to remove, without legal consequences, without being bound by any conditions (cf. Muhle 23); thus taking a life did not necessarily serve any purpose at all.

The ultimate sovereign power over life is hence the action of taking life or refraining from requiring death. The sovereign only interacts passively, "solely through negative operations" (Kelly 95) or by relinquishing those claims. Apart from taxes and other services, the seizure of life is "the moment of the most obvious and most spectacular manifestation of the absolute power of the sovereign" (Foucault 2004: 248). The lack of any other interaction creates a certain detachment between the monarch and his subjects: "From the point of view of the state, society [is] treated as something extrinsic to it, effectively like a natural resource" (Kelly 95). For the sovereign power, the interrelation of the individual subjects is rather irrelevant; hereby the multitude of subjects is not the *population*, but a "collection of subjects" (Foucault 2007: 350, 352).

Foucault also explores different subtypes of power, introducing the 'pastorate' in *Security, Territory, Population*, following Christian-Hebrew traditions. The principle of

the pastorate is characterized by Foucault as 'omnes et singulatim': "The shepherd must keep his eye on all and on each" (Foucault 2007: 128). This poses the 'paradox of the shepherd' of being simultaneously concerned about the flock as a whole and the individual sheep:

> In this Hebrew theme of the flock, the shepherd owes everything to his flock to the extent of agreeing to sacrifice himself for its salvation. But, on the other hand, since he must save each of the sheep, will he not find himself in a situation in which he has to neglect the whole of the flock in order to save a single sheep? (ibid.)

For Foucault, the pastorate "seems [...] to sketch out, or is the prelude to what I have called governmentality" (ibid. 184); as mentioned above, Foucault's notion of governmentality is closely connected to biopolitics. Hence the pastorate's paradoxical relation to individual well-being is also a precursor of biopolitics (cf. Mayes[7] 111, 122f; Ojakangas quoted in Mayes 122).

The concept of a 'raison d'état', another subtype later brought up in *Security, Territory, Population*, is not concerned with individual salvation (cf. Foucault 2007: 260), but mainly with the public good, the "state's salvation" (ibid. 262), by all available means. Foucault argues that raison d'état can turn into a violent form, the 'coup d'état' (cf. ibid. 263) which includes something Foucault coins 'necessary violence': In his example, Charlemagne planted "assassins among the Saxons" to kill "disturbers of the public peace and the state" (ibid. 263f). According to the raison d'état, the state's salvation is the priority and that legitimates transgressing laws "due to a pressing and urgent event" (ibid. 262) and a certain degree of injustice towards singular subjects of the state. The well-being of individuals is dispensable and collateral damage bearable due to the higher objective. Foucault references Naudé, quoting Charron:

> Many hold that the wise and well-advised Prince must not only command according to the laws, but command the laws themselves if necessity requires it. To retain justice in big things, says Charron, it is sometimes necessary to turn away from it in small things, and in order to do right overall, it is permissible to cause harm in detail. (ibid. 263)

Thus, in contrast to the pastorate's paradox, the raison d'état's principle is just indirectly beneficial for the individual: "The salvation of each is the salvation of all, and the salvation of all is the salvation of each" (ibid.).

[7] Mayes, however, disagrees with Foucault's characterization of the shepherd and the pastorate, arguing that Foucault dropped the inherent violence of it. Therefore, the contrast between the caring pastorate and the unconcern of the sovereign is portrayed far less stark in Mayes.

3.2.2) Biopolitics and population

The central turning point is now the discovery of the concept of *population*, which Foucault locates in the late 18th century, and consequently, the governing of this social body:

> Das 18. Jahrhundert entdeckte etwas sehr Wichtiges: dass Macht nicht nur über Untertanen ausgeübt wird, wie es der Grundthese der Monarchie entsprach, wonach es einen Souverän und Untertanen gab. Man entdeckte, dass Macht auch über die Bevölkerung ausgeübt wird. (Foucault 2005: 235)

The population is not a collection of separate and disjoined individuals, but a coherent and correlative group, to a certain extend a biological super-organism, a distinct biological-political entity (cf. Lemke 2007: 81). Thus, the inclusion of this biological level constitutes the name of the term *bio*politics: A politic that is focused on the development of life.

Probably the most incisive description Foucault offers of this turning point is at the outset of his lecture at the University of Bahia in 1976:

> Bis dahin gab es nur Untertanen, nur Rechtssubjekte, denen man Güter und auch das Leben wegnehmen konnte. Nun gibt es Körper und Bevölkerungen. Die Macht ist materialistisch geworden. Sie beschränkt sich nicht mehr im Wesentlichen auf den rechtlichen Aspekt. Nun muss sie mit realen Dingen umgehen, mit dem Körper und dem Leben. Das Leben gelangt in den Einflussbereich der Macht - eine überaus wichtige Veränderung und ohne Zweifel eine der wichtigsten in der Geschichte der menschlichen Gesellschaften. (Foucault 2005: 236)

The inclusion of the biological into the ambit of politics entails, besides the social body of the population, the *individual* body and the circumstance that it is "dressierbar" (ibid.). Both are addressed in biopolitics but addressed differently. Foucault deploys a dichotomous system of biopolitical means and objects, between "Körper und Bevölkerungen" (ibid.) as quoted above. He differentiates as follows:

> So we have two series: the body-organism-discipline-institutions series, and the population-biological processes-regulatory mechanisms-State. An organic institutional set, or the organo-discipline of the institution, if you like, and, on the other hand, a biological and Statist set, or bioregulation by the State. (Foucault 2004: 250)

The disciplinary mechanism addresses the individual but is based on the multiplicity of individuals (cf. Lemke 2013: 51) and is realized in the disciplinary institutions such as schools or military. The discipline employs different techniques of training to achieve a standardization of docile bodies. The other technology is "centered not upon the body but upon life" (Foucault 2004: 249), a regulatory mechanism which aims at the population in its entirety, a normalizing force to "establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate" (ibid.). Both mechanisms are not contradictory, but complementary; they are two sides of the

same coin, the "two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed" (Foucault 1978: 139). The disciplinary mechanism, however, will be henceforth mostly excluded in this paper, as the biopolitical processes of the *Purge* display mainly features of said regulatory mechanism.

The regulatory mechanism aims at the bigger picture, not the individual body, but the species-body. The function of this regulation is to prolong and enhance life, to improve the statistical average life of the population. It tries to compensate for the "mass effect characteristic of population" (Foucault 2004: 249) and aims to level the "random events that can occur in a living mass" (ibid.). In short, it tries to control life and anything that could impinge the quality of overall life. This includes protecting the population body from any internal danger. To achieve this, the regulatory mechanism relies on statistics and demographic data such as mortality rate and longevity, accident statistics, cases of illnesses and epidemiology, birth rates and infant mortality rates as well as tabulation of wealth (cf. Lemke 2013: 51). Interpreting those figures, the state also depends on experts, whom Oksala attributes the actual underlying control in biopolitical realms, due to their "depoliticized violence of expert knowledge" (Oksala 38).

Biopower therefore aims at improving the well-being of the whole population, contrasting e.g. the *raison d'état*, whose highest priority is the preservation of the state. Taking care of the social body included new provisions such as public hygiene, social medicine (cf. Foucault 2007: 352), and improving the housing situation. Actively investing in life and protecting it through, for instance, predicting and preventing accidents or compensating for individual failure and levity contrasts furthermore the traditional sovereign power which interacted, if at all, only in a negative way. Although these types of power are in several ways fundamentally different, Foucault does not describe the important caesura as an entire replacement of the old right with a new right and ceasing power of the sovereign:

> I wouldn't say exactly that sovereignty's old right—to take life or let live—was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it. This is the right, or rather precisely the opposite right. [...] The right of sovereignty was the right to take life or let live. And then this new right is established: the right to make live and to let die. (Foucault 2004: 241)

However, Foucault does also state that the power of sovereignty is "increasingly on the retreat" (ibid.: 254) and that the new type of power, the "disciplinary or regulatory disciplinary power is on the advance" (ibid.); the most obvious manifestation of this shift of powers is the death sentence. Whereas under sovereign power, death was

the "most spectacular manifestation" (ibid. 248) of this power, the exact opposite is the case for the new type of power which is focused on life:

> Death now becomes, in contrast, the moment when the individual escapes all power, falls back on himself and retreats, so to speak, into his own privacy. Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death. (ibid.)

Putting subjects to death is thus disqualified as a mechanism of power (cf. Muhle 27), since death itself is the "ultimate traumatic point of biopolitics" (Žižek 509), when this new power is originally focused on fostering life.[8]

3.2.3) Biopolitics and Racism

According to this *focus on life*, modern carnages should thus not be possible or at least ostracized by the state. The fact, however, that killing is in another way still of "vital importance" (Foucault 2004: 256) for the modern, biopolitical power is paradoxical for Foucault:

> In der Geschichte des modernen Staates gibt es ein Paradoxon. Zur selben Zeit, als der Staat sich um die körperliche und geistige Gesundheit des Einzelnen zu kümmern begann, machte er sich auch daran, seine größten Blutbäder anzurichten. (Foucault 2005: 84)

Both in *Society Must Be Defended* and in *The Will To Knowledge* Foucault chooses drastic, dramatic and to some extent histrionic words to demark this crucial point of his theory: That racism is the loophole which allows a power that is originally focused on *fostering* life to *destroy* life. Introducing this problem, he poses the question of how such a biopower is able to kill, when earlier he said that this new "power [...] ignores death" (Foucault 2004: 248):

> How can a power such as this kill, if it is true that its basic function is to improve life [...]? How, under these conditions, is it possible for a political power to kill, to call for deaths, to demand deaths, to give the order to kill, and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death? Given that this power's objective is essentially to make live, how can it let die? How can the power of death, the function of death, be exercised in a political system centered upon biopower? It is, I think, at this point that racism intervenes. It is indeed the emergence of this biopower that inscribes it in the mechanisms of the State. (ibid. 254[9])

Racism is not new, but according to Foucault it has changed into a different form. The former war of races, of one race against another, has ceased and changed into a modern racism which is rather occupied with itself: The purity of the social body.

[8] Concerning this aspect, Foucault also comments on a contemporary issue, the capital punishment in the USA: "At the time Foucault was writing, capital punishment had been suspended in the United States for several years as a result of a Supreme Court decision [of 1972]" (Kelly 97), while it resumed a few months after Foucault's last lecture of *Society must be defended* – with the *Gregg v. Georgia* case on July 2. In a way, however, Foucault remained right in that the punishment is executed only covertly, in contrast to e.g. medieval decapitations in broad public.

[9] Foucault 1978: 138f is similar, but less drastic.

Similar to the change of power, racism became engaged with biology in the 19th century, not any longer directing the racism to external threads but to biological weaknesses of its own social body. Foucault's usage of "racism" can be confusing here, because Foucault does not follow the abstract construct of for example Kant with different, separate races such as Caucasian in this concept. On the contrary, he argues a hostile disposition towards everything that does not seem beneficial for one's own social body and therefore for one's own *race*; Foucault deems this "racism against the abnormal" (Foucault quoted in Taylor 752). Consequently, this results in a blurring of the classic concept of race:

> Indeed, the claim that racism, in the modern age, is 'racism against the abnormal', seems, oddly, to dispense with race. This need not be racism against a race, Foucault makes clear, but a racism that the White race (for instance) may turn against its own (undesirable) members. [...] race no longer refers to different but qualitatively neutral cultures, but to hierarchically ranked biological groups. (Taylor 749, 752)

This modern concept of racism is the underlying principle for biopower to kill not *despite*, but *exactly because* of its focus on the improvement of life: In order to foster and control a 'normal' and healthy population, it is important to obliterate deviant, unfavorable and inimical individuals. In an interview of 1975, Foucault describes how the body of society (cf. Foucault 2002: 932) in the system of biopolitics is also to be treated iatrically (cf. ibid.) – like an individual patient. That includes e.g. the removal of excrescences or taking laxatives that cause pain but eventually cure the patient. Internal purification takes the place of fighting an "enemy race" (Foucault 2004: 257). Protecting the "security of the whole from internal dangers" (ibid. 249) does not only consist of the state preventing negative effects through one's own failure in, for instance, preventable accidents but also includes eliminating seemingly destructive forces of society. Foucault emphasizes that 'killing' in a biopolitical sense does not exclusively mean direct murder, but also "indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection" (ibid. 256), in other words 'killing' is also to *let die*.

On the one hand, racism thus secures the originally *sovereign* right to take life (cf. Foucault 2004: 256) through framing this killing or exposing to death in a positive way: through portraying killing as life-sustaining. Racism is the only way the new type of power can retain the right to kill: "Once the State functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the State" (ibid.). On the other hand, racism also provides the demarcation line of what needs to be disposed of; Foucault explains that racism is "primarily a way of introducing a break into the

domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die" (ibid. 255), it serves as a way of "separating out the groups that exist within a population" (ibid.).

According to this, violence is necessary to keep a race clean; Whereas in Foucault's portrayal of raison d'état necessary violence and loss of individual life is a form of planned wastage, military casualties on the way to state stability, biopower's racism goes even one step further: The eradication of certain parts of the population is not only necessary, but it is the very core, the very reason of the population's well-being. Foucault describes it as an inherent interdependency:

> Racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other that is not a military or warlike relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship: 'The more inferior species die out, *the more abnormal individuals are eliminated*, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I – as species rather than individual – can live, *the stronger I will be*, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate.' The fact that the other dies does not mean simply that I live in the sense that his death guarantees my safety; the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer. (Foucault 2004: 255; emphasis added)

This promise of salvation of a pure social body, a strong and healthy species provokes the need for incessant purification, a "permanent social war" (Stoler 70). Racism is not impulsive, it is "internal to the biopolitical state, woven into the weft of the social body, threaded through its fabric" (ibid.). In situating the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures (Foucault 2004), Bertani & Fontana refer to 19th century's penal theory of "social defense", which aimed at 'dangerous individuals' in order to "identify, isolate, and normalize" (ibid. 285) them; Bertani & Fontana label that the "early dawn of ethnic cleansings" (ibid.). This modern type of racism, the racism that is the foundation of the functioning of the biopower, is more drastic than the formula "to make live and to let die" (ibid. 241); Foucault writes in *History of Sexuality* "to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault 1978: 138). Although death is not the focus of the power anymore, it is still an integral part of the care for life – either somewhat passively, through neglecting and desisting from fostering or through exposure to death or even direct elimination of detrimental elements of the population, in all ways *disallowing* the life to continue. Biopower "establishes a mutually reinforcing relation between care and violence" (Mills 98); life-caring becomes murderously violent.

For Foucault, the ultimate realization of both the sovereign right to kill and the biopower of fostering was the Nazi regime: "Nazi society [...] has generalized

biopower in an absolute sense, but which has also generalized the sovereign right to kill" (Foucault 2004: 259), here, those two forms of power "coincide exactly" (ibid. 260). The murderous quality of biopolitics through the fanatism of race and elimination of the deemed negative influences on the 'Volk', the social body of the nation, embody the absolute state not only of an unprecedented form of disciplinary power, but of a biopolitical state:

> Of course, no State could have more disciplinary power than the Nazi regime. Nor was there any other State in which the biological was so tightly, so insistently, regulated. Disciplinary power and biopower: all this permeated, underpinned, Nazi society. (Foucault 2007: 259)

The excessive biopower of the Nazis also underpins Foucault's point that modern racism is not primarily about the traditional notion of different races but is hostile towards every aspect that may threaten the particular species in any way: "In the biopower system, [...] killing or the imperative to kill is acceptable only if it results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the elimination of the biological threat to and the improvement of the species or race" (ibid. 256). The Nazi regime did not stop at the sterilization of the disabled and delinquents or at the imprisonment of political insurgents to remove them from the species. The annihilation of millions of human lives in concentration camps, including the former categories, shows that enemies of the state were not only "adversaries in the political sense of the term" (ibid.) but "*threats*, either external or internal, *to the population* and *for the population*" (ibid, emphasis added) that need to be eradicated. Biopolitics becomes a fundamental fight against every divergent individual element of the social body that seems to be obstructive for the advancement of the species; Aspects that are not primarily biological such as criminality, religion, madness[10], economic status or homelessness are turned into a biological threat to the species. It is not sufficient to tranquilize and isolate potential threads; in the normalizing biopower they have to be eliminated. The "abject do not die" (Dauphinee 236) claims Dauphinee, in this political system, "they are *erased*" (ibid, emphasis in original).

Several authors stress the aspect of socio-economic classes in this new form of racism: Taylor suggests that the racist discourse "superimpos[es] [biology] upon class and other forms of social deviance", Magiros argues that racism assigns biological categories to social domains in which they are not applicable (cf. Magiros

[10] Stoler argues that Foucault integrates his former works on madness, prison and sexuality into his narrative of a normalizing state and the "genealogy of racism in which the exclusion and/or elimination of some assures the protection of others" (Stoler 85).

72) such as [social] classes, and Sarasin analyses Foucault's portrayal of modern racism to be the pure gestures of selection (56). In *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt speaks of a "liquidation of classes" (322) and of citizens dreading to belong to a 'dispensable' underclass:

> "Wir wissen nicht, wie viele Menschen in diesem Massenzeitalter – in dem sich jeder auch dann noch fürchtet, 'überflüssig' zu sein, wenn das Gespenst der Arbeitslosigkeit nicht umgeht – freudig jenen 'Bevölkerungspolitikern' zustimmen würden, die unter diesem oder jenem ideologischen Vorwand [...] die 'Überflüssigen' ausmerzen." (Arendt 2005: 906)

Ultimately, the wrath of biopower is directed towards every individual that does not contribute positively to the species in order to guarantee the perseverance – that includes not only biological anomalies, but also economic shortcomings or any other debilitating behavior. In that way, this culling becomes essential for the life of the population, killing becomes life-maintaining, massacres become vital. It is not in an ironical way that Foucault denotes massacres as vital, as Kelly (97) claims it to be; in the logic of biopolitics, massacres are *literally* a life necessity for the remaining part of the population: either because the disruptive elements have been wiped out or even because the death of members of the species can lead to a purification, as a "way of regenerating one's own race. As more and more of our number die, the race to which we belong will become all the purer" (Foucault 2004: 257), in both cases strengthening the species, the race, the social body.

3.3) Problems and Challenges of the term *biopolitics*

A large point of debate in secondary literature is the question of what distinguishes biopolitics from biopower. This paper uses the terms interchangeably, mainly because Foucault did not make a clear contradistinction in either of his publications (cf. Stingelin 15; Lemke 2013: 48). Fiaccadori, however, claims that Foucault started with using biopower and biopolitics indiscriminately, but at some point a difference is discernible:

> It is interesting to note that at this point Foucault also appears to distinguish between "biopower" and "biopolitics," wherein the former is a broader term that encompasses both biopolitics and discipline, whilst the latter term refers to "the constitution and incorporation of the population as a new subject of governance." (Fiaccadori 155; quotes Catherine Mills)

This discord of whether there is actually a difference between those terms and if so, what it constitutes, somewhat blurs the usage of the concept. Muhle quotes an interview with Rancière (2001) to show how working with this concept in tension with the two terms is rather difficult:

> Die Folge dieser Ontologisierung ist die Tatsache, dass die 'Bio-Macht' und die 'Bio-Politik' zu einer Art Heidegger'schen Master-Signifikant geworden sind, die Alles und Nichts bedeuten. (Rancière quoted in Muhle 22)

There are different factors that contribute to this broad and varying reception. On the one hand, the debate and the authors following Foucault such as Agamben, Hardt & Negri etc. have unfolded parallel as different translations and transcripts of Foucault's lectures & interviews were gradually published. Stoler, who still carried out research with audio recordings of the lectures in the Saulchoir library in Paris, argues that up until the mid-1990s, "few 'Foucauldians' seem to know of the taped lectures, and even fewer have heard them" (Stoler 57) and tells how she dubiously tried to obtain an Italian transcript of two lectures. Before the lectures of *Society must be defended*, of *Security, Territory, Population* and the collection of interviews and talks, like e.g. at the University of Bahia 1976, were published, Foucault's *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* remained the only official point of reference for biopolitics. Stoler even speaks of a "mystique that surrounds the fate of the lectures" (ibid.). Lemke, however, writes with the overview of the above-mentioned lectures and other works in 2013 about another factor in the differing Foucault receptions:

> Foucaults Gebrauch des Begriffs der Biopolitik ist nicht einheitlich und verschiebt sich in seinen Texten permanent. Werkgeschichtlich lassen sich drei verschiedene Verwendungsweisen unterscheiden. Erstens steht Biopolitik für eine historische Zäsur im politischen Handeln und Denken, die sich durch eine Relativierung und Reformulierung souveräner Macht auszeichnet; zweitens spricht Foucault biopolitischen Mechanismen eine zentrale Rolle bei der Entstehung des modernen Rassismus zu; in einer dritten Bedeutung zielt der Begriff auf eine besondere Kunst des Regierens, die erst mit liberalen Führungstechniken auftaucht. (Lemke 2013: 48)

Lemke thus argues on the other hand that not only the different level of availability of Foucault material, but also Foucault's different textual elaborations can lead to a difference. However, Lemke's three different 'manners of uses' overlap in some ways and are not as clear cut as Lemke structures them. In most instances, when Foucault references biopolitics and the historical caesura, he also includes the discourse on state racism, most notably in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* and in *Society Must Be Defended*.

Still there are other problems in the reception of Foucault: Kelly argues that the structure of *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* is "not particularly clear and can be confusing" (Kelly 2), Stoler states there are "tensions between what he wrote and what he said" (Stoler viii) and Muhle calls the dividing line between sovereign power and biopower a "fragile, aber vorhandene Trennung" (Muhle 44). The differentiation of two separate

powers is not only a problem for Muhle, Fiaccadori considers the consequent separation of those powers a paradox:

> It is as if almost, if not all, attempts to find a resolution to the problem of whether to consider biopower as substitutive for or a complement to sovereign power tend either to reproduce this same ambiguity or to underplay the theoretical difficulties that arise from keeping them separate. (Fiaccadori 169)

As stated above (ch. 3.2), Foucault himself was partly unclear about the relation of those two powers. On the one hand, the retreat of sovereign power is, according to Foucault, a cornerstone for the establishment of the new biopower, on the other hand, the Nazi regime fully occupied and eventually embodied the sovereign right to take life but held disciplinary power and biopower in an unprecedented way as well (cf. Foucault 2004: 259).

In comparison to Foucault's overall output, it has been argued that biopolitics occupy only a fringe of Foucault's work (cf. Patton 107) and that he tackled the concept only obliquely and allusively (cf. Senellart in Foucault 2007: 370; Lemke 2013: 67; Stoler 22, 75, 79; Patton 107). Due to reasons that are not entirely clear (cf. ch. 2), Foucault never actually talked about biopolitics in his lecture *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Instead, he explored liberalism in great detail. In the manuscript for the first lecture, Foucault explains his focus:

> But who does not see that this is only part of something much larger, which [is] this new governmental reason? Studying liberalism as the general framework of biopolitics. (Foucault 2008: 328)

Eventually, Foucault never came back to the fundament of biopolitics, but focused on governmentality which is, going back to Lemke, the third accentuation of biopower for Foucault: The art to govern, the entanglements with liberalism and for Foucault a crucial element in the development of capitalism, as biopolitics provided for the "controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes" (Foucault 1978: 141). For Senellart, Foucault's research on biopolitics and his turn to liberalism both "bring to light the forms of experience and rationality on the basis of which power over life was organized in the West" (Senellart in Foucault 2008: 370). With this turn, however, Foucault left open the questions of the distinction between biopower and biopolitics and a specification where to draw the line between sovereign power and modern biopolitics – among others.

3.4) In Pursuit of Foucault: Agamben & Co

The most discussed contribution to Foucault's concept is without doubt *Homo Sacer* (1995) by the Italian Philosopher Giorgio Agamben.[11] Another prominent sequel include Hardt & Negri's *Empire* (2000) which deals rather sparsely with the basic concept of Foucault's biopolitics but formulates an elaborate critique of capitalism and globalization. Stingelin calls *Empire* a "Fortschreibung von Gilles Deleuze' Fortschreibung der Foucaultschen Genealogie der Disziplinar- und Kontrollgesellschaften" (Stingelin 19). Neither Agamben nor Hardt & Negri differentiate between the two terms biopolitics and biopower (cf. Lemke 2013: 79; Fiaccadori 168).

Mills meanwhile lauds Rose & Rabinow for their "empirically focused approach to biopower" (Mills 83) which discusses biopower in relation to the 'near future', thus also loosely following Deleuze. Rose & Rabinow in turn dismiss Agamben's theory as ideas that "describe everything but analyze nothing" (quoted in Mills 89). Lemke finally attributes Fehér & Heller, as well as Anthony Giddens important positions in the discussion about biopower (cf. Lemke 2013: 69ff). However, as Agamben's contribution is most relevant for this paper, other authors are not explored in further detail.

Agamben's *Homo Sacer* took enormous criticism: Sarasin claims that Agamben's concept systematically misses Foucault's point, so that both concepts float "berührungslos aneinander vorbei" (Sarasin 58f), with Agamben's ideas "merkwürdig unbeteiligt" concerning Foucault's original concept (ibid. 61). Muhle censures Agamben's interpretation of Foucault as "Sackgasse des verallgemeinerten Ausnahmezustands" (Muhle 10), which would render every attempt of differentiation obsolete. Lemke, on the other hand, is rather ambivalent: He dismisses Agamben's theory as "unterkomplex" and "überzogen" (Lemke 2007: 18), as an "übertriebene Dramatisierung" (ibid. 98) which poses "eine Reihe schwerwiegender Probleme" (ibid. 18) and criticizes that Agamben omits important analytical differentiation (cf. ibid. 89). Still Lemke praises the divisive brilliancy of the book (cf. Lemke 2013: 78) and claims that despite the censure, Agamben's proposition is "plausibler als viele Kommentatoren und Kritiker annehmen" (Lemke 2007: 89; cf. 18).

[11] Lemke (2013: 15) identifies Agamben Hardt & Negri as the most prominent successors; Agamben, however, provoked unequally more responses to his theory.

Contrary to Foucault, Agamben considers biopolitics originating in ancient Greece. Before it gained the center stage in the 20th century, biopolitics was developing "unterirdisch, aber beharrlich" (Agamben 129). Agamben's theory is based on two different notions of life: Purely biological life ("zoe") and political existence, social life and participation ("bios"). The title of his book, *Homo Sacer* connotes a Roman juridical figure: A person who is reduced to "zoe", to his pure physical being, his naked or bare life, without any rights. Those *homines sacri* could be killed and tormented with impunity but could not be ritually sacrificed. In this limbo of not being defined as living but also not dead, Agamben describes that such a reduced person is excluded from society but not entirely external to it; this person is included solely through its exclusion. It is an *exception* from the law, but it can only be defined as such due to the existence of law itself. Similarly, the juridical sphere of a camp is at the same time outside the legal system as it is included through its exclusion from the law. Oksala explains it as follows:

> Bare life is thus something that cannot be clearly demarcated and then simply negated. It is biological life that has been politicized in being included in the political community, but only through its exclusion. [...] The state of exception is not anarchy or chaos because an order still exists, even if it is not the order dictated by laws. The exception is outside the law, but it thereby defines its limits and creates the normal situation in which the law can be in force. (30)

The concept of 'camp' is central to Agamben's theory: For Agamben, it is the "biopolitisches Paradigma der Moderne" (Agamben 127) and has become the norm, the "*nómos* der Moderne" (ibid. 147). 'Camp' is used not only literally for camps such as the Nazi regime's concentration camp, but also as a signifier for a state of exception: Agamben mentions death row detainees, brain dead and coma patients, and refugees (cf. ibid. 142f; 168-174), all of which still live, but in a state of exception. In literal concentration camps, the rights of camp inmates were stripped away entirely, the inmates could "so vollständig ihrer Rechte und Eigenschaften beraubt werden, bis es keine Handlung mehr gab, die an ihnen zu vollziehen noch als Verbrechen erschienen wäre" (ibid. 180). Agamben considers the camp as the "absoluteste biopolitische Raum, der je in die Realität umgesetzt worden ist" (ibid.), because the power is only occupied with the management of bare life, with "reine[m] Leben ohne jegliche Vermittlung" (ibid.). For Agamben, in a modern, biopolitical realm, sovereign power is *outside* the law as it is above the law and can draw the line between "'wertlosen' oder 'lebensunwerten Lebens'" (ibid. 148). The exception becomes a permanent condition:

> Wenn es dem Souverän, insofern er über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet, zu allen Zeiten zukommt, darüber zu entscheiden, welches Leben getötet werden kann, ohne dass ein Mord begangen wird, dann tendiert diese Macht im Zeitalter der Biopolitik dazu, sich vom Ausnahmezustand zu emanzipieren, um sich in die Macht über die Entscheidung zu transformieren, an welchem Punkt das Leben aufhört, politisch relevant zu sein. (ibid. 151)

4) The *Purge*

4.1) The *Purge* Franchise: Success and Reception

The Purge started off with a relatively small production budget of three million dollar. However, the movie made 36 million dollar just in its opening weekend which is twelvefold the production costs (Boxofficemojo.com). The success surprised even the actor Ethan Hawke, who said it felt "a little bit like sneaking into the candy store" (Labrecque 12). The production costs could be kept small due to the surveillance camera recordings and shaky-cam shots, a technique which has been deliberately and more frequently used by horror film directors ever since the success of *Blairwich Project*, a film shot solely in amateur-recording style (cf. Corliss). Furthermore, *The Purge*'s single location – the home of the Sandins in the gated community – made costly location scouting redundant. The second installment, *The Purge: Anarchy*, explores the Purge-night in the city while the characters are pitchforked into several different city-structures, which made production far more expensive; however, the film still was a box office success (cf. Corliss). *The Purge: Election Year* became the highest-grossing film of the franchise yet, earning 118,6 million dollar worldwide (Boxofficemojo.com). Although the third film ended the Purge-nights for good, the franchise continues, with the prequel *The First Purge* due to be released July 4 of this year. Moreover, there are rumors of a *Purge* TV series.

The films were received rather heterogenuously by the critics. The concept seems to be hard to grasp for some reviewers: "The high-concept hook of the franchise – that a 'cathartic' half-day period of murder and mayhem would drive the crime rate down – is fundamentally ridiculous" (Scott, Tobias), others lauded its "blend of astute commentary and effective carnage" (Scott A.O.). Generally, *The Purge: Anarchy* was reviewed most positively, with reviews praising the film as "one of those follow-ups that improves on the original" (Dargis) and the director DeMonaco as an "efficient orchestrator of action" (Lodge 92), despite the script's "philosophical and metaphorical shortcomings" (ibid.). In contrast, *The Purge: Election Year* was met with devastating reviews, dismissing it as a "toothless affair" (Zilberman) and as

"the most idiotic [part of the *Purge*] yet" (Krayewski 56). *The Purge: Election Year* indeed seems a bit off, possibly because the authors intended to focus on an election due to the fact that in the year of publication the controversial 2016 elections in the USA were bound to be held – thus slightly losing the interesting social implications of the franchise's concept.

Meanwhile, the films found their way into pop culture, e.g. with an episode of the highly successful *Rick & Morty* devoting a persiflage to the *Purge*, with Rick explaining Morty that "You gotta harness your repressed rage!" (*Rick & Morty* , S2, E9, 00:10:39) and that retaining moral standards is "not really the theme of tonight's party" (ibid. 00:08:00). The core of the Purge night has been explained by critics in various, creative ways, e.g. by stating that Americans receive a "mass-stay-out-of-jail card" (Dargis) or comparing the night with the "American dream built on the 'sacrifice' of a disposable underclass" (Bitel 88). As Worland states, "low-budget, exploitation-style horror movies carry greater progressive potential than glossy, big studio productions" (21f.), and the *Purge*'s progressive idea of a social and political experiment is not only noticed, but also diversely and mostly positively received, as intended by the makers of the film:

> We called it 'smugglers cinema,' which is [when] you disguise an interesting film as a genre film [...] You make something wildly entertaining, and underneath it has a subversive message. (Labrecque 12)

The next chapter thus presents the concept of the *Purge*, which is the cornerstone for the subversive, socio-economic implications of the film series.

4.2) Concept(s) of the *Purge*

The basic concept is a twelve-hour period of impunity which was established by a proto-fascist but still democratically elected group of politicians called the "New Founding Fathers" [NFFA] in order to reduce the overall crime rates the rest of the year. In an early clip of *The Purge*, an expert called Dr. Buynak explains the motivation more sophisticatedly:

> The Purge not only contains societal violence to a single evening, but the country-wide catharsis creates psychological stability by letting us release the aggression we all have inside of us. (*The Purge* 00:05:36)

The first image of *The Purge* also includes another detail of this modern-day tradition: "Unemployment is at 1%" (00:01:03) in the USA of 2022, the reason being introduced minutes later in a diegetic radio broadcast (00:03:22): "The poor can't afford to protect themselves. They're the victims tonight." Hence, two of the film's most

important elements are ushered in within the first five minutes of the first film: a psychological, cathartic release of aggression and a reduction of a socio-economically trailed population. Both elements – but particularly the release of violence – are integrated into the omnipresent slogans "cleanse our souls" (*The Purge* 00:33:33) and the NFFA's "Purge and purify" (*The Purge: Election Year* 00:07:54).

The etymological level of "Purge" can be traced back to several roots: Merriam-Webster defines "the act of purging" as the "vigorous evacuation of the bowels (as from the action of a cathartic or an infective agent)" (*Merriam-Webster*: *Purgation*), figuratively a painful, but necessary way to dispose of negative elements.[12] The act of 'purging' is furthermore a procedure in genetic science which rids a highly inbred gene pool of detrimental alleles. The most commonly used instance of *purge* prior to the films' appropriation of the term, however, is probably in a political context: Unwanted party-members are violently removed to *expurgate* their influence on the party or politics in general; moreover, non-party members such as intellectuals can be removed and put to death to minimize a subversive influence on the social body as a whole. Historically perpetrated almost exclusively in dictatorships, the most prominent example for a purge is presumably the Soviet purge of 1936-1938 during the dictatorship of Stalin, which is known as "The Great Purge"; Hannah Arendt coins the term "Superpurge" (Arendt 1973: 342) for the purge "which had decimated a whole generation of Soviet intellectuals" (ibid.). The Third Reich's "Night of the Long Knives" in 1934, also known as "The Blood Purge" is a prominent example for a political purge in Nazi Germany which consolidated Hitler's position through the elimination of suspected disloyal party-cadre. In the context of the films, the socio-economically marginalized population stratum is implicitly rendered the unwanted element the cleansing during the Purge-night is intended to eliminate (cf. Christopher 64 and Bitel 88).

In the explanation of the above-mentioned fictional expert "Dr. Buynak" (*The Purge 05:36*), another concept is broached: the “country-wide catharsis” (ibid.) mentioned in the film has its roots in Aristotle's concept of "catharsis" (κάθαρσις). Aristotle used this term to counter the censorship of theatre; his argument, though

[12] The first film, *The Purge*, subtly references to purgatives: The national symbol of support for the Purge-night is the "blue Baptisia" (*The Purge* 03:58), which was used by a native Americans tribe, the Cherokees, as a purgative in form of a tea.

fiercely disputed among antiquity experts, is reproduced in modern reception as follows:

> Indem sie (scil.: die Tragödie) fremdes Leid mimetisch darstellt, [...] erregt [sie] in stärkstem Maße Furcht und Mitleid, führt eben dadurch zu einer unschädlichen Befriedigung der von Natur in jedem Menschen vorhandenen Triebanlagen und bewirkt so eine „Reinigung“ von solchen Affekten, eine Katharsis, die von einem unschädlichen Lustgefühl über die Erleichterung begleitet ist und zugleich die Gefahr eines Überwucherns [...] bannt. (Wagner 426f)

Golden translates the term as "intellectual clarification" (quoted in Wagner 422), and particularly in horror film theory this clarification is often discussed:

> In the perennial debates about the social functions of art, Aristotle is frequently evoked in relation to his theory of catharsis, an idea that seems particularly germane to analysis of the horror film. Aristotle implied that art ought not be subject to censorship because by experiencing vicariously a range of events and emotions in an artwork - especially fear and pity - the reader/viewer was purged of the desire to act out any such natural but dangerous tendencies in the real world. The individual experience of catharsis through art functioned as a social safety valve. (Worland 13)

The *Purge* can be analyzed in the light of Aristotelian catharsis in multiple ways. The main function for the viewer of the *Purge* is to "purge" oneself of the urge to commit such unsettling instances of violence as they can be witnessed watching the *Purge* films. Christopher, however, argues further for a meta-level catharsis for the viewer: The underlying – according to Ethan Hawke "subversive" – criticism of social and economic disparity, of class division and of "a weapons lobby run amok" (Hartlaub) provides the viewer with the "cathartic fantasy of having criticized bourgeois affluence and capitalist corruption" (Christopher 64) when leaving the cinema. Lastly, for the fictional population of *The Purge*'s USA in 2022, the Purge-night is an ultimate or inversed stage of Aristotle's catharsis: A "social safety valve" (Worland 13) is not achieved by experimenting strong emotions in art but by acting out the exact same violent tendencies in one single night which the system is supposed to suppress the rest of the year.

This unique depressurization of aggression in a single event can also be seen as a reference to Shirley Jackson’s influential 1948 short story *The Lottery*, in which a village gathers once a year to randomly draw by lot one victim to be stoned to death by the other villagers. A possible theoretical background to analyze *The Lottery*, Girard's 'scapegoat mechanism', can similarly help to deepen the understanding of the *Purge*: In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard postulates that there is an inherent violence in every society or social construct which has to be addressed and released

through a scapegoat victim.[13] The question for Girard is not whether the violence is exercised or not, but which victim is chosen: "When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim" (Girard 2). Violent outbreaks are inevitable, according to Girard. A sacrificial victim is chosen to deflect the violence so that the members of society do not turn to each other in order to "protect the entire community from its own violence" (ibid. 8). Moreover, Girard regards the idea of catharsis as misleading because "whether we refer to catharsis or purification, purgation or exorcism, it is actually the idea of evacuation and separation that is foremost" (ibid. 304), thereby considering his concept superior. However, in a way, the concept of *purging* in the film-series, Aristotle's catharsis, and Girard's scapegoat mechanism differently address a similar problem: An extrication of violent emotions and desires from the social body, either by containing this violence to be released in one night only, through deflection on a surrogate scapegoat victim or through experiencing these emotions in art. All share the position that violent tendencies are deeply rooted in human nature and need to be addressed.

4.3) Horror and the *Purge*

The *Purge* films cater to many genre conventions, e.g. when it comes to setting and main themes. Also true to horror film conventions, the film carries sharp social criticism as well as reactionary commentary. Particularly the first film of the franchise, *The Purge*, offers a typical horror film setting. The house of the Sandins is situated in a gated community, an enclosed suburb outside the city center, which is shown when James Sandin returns home from work and enters through a gate into the suburban streets of his neighborhood (*The Purge* 00:01:20). Locating the film in an American gated community follows both the traditional setting of suburban horror films of the 70s while addressing the controversial debate over the nature of gated communities; Knapp comments that "the gated community represents the last frontier for white suburbia" (125), and recent studies show that quarrels and neighborhood disputes "appear no less in GCs than in 'regular' communities and neighborhoods" (Atkinson & Blandy ix) – shown in *The Purge* by the neighbor's deprecation concerning the expansion of the Sandin's home (cf. *The Purge* 00:04:20).

The attack on and the following dismantling of the nuclear family – as shown in *The Purge*'s siege-like situation of the home invasion – is a recurring theme in the film series. While in the first film James Sandin dies defending his home and his

[13] For the connection of Foucault's biopower and Girard's scapegoat mechanism cf. Denike 123.

family, *The Purge: Anarchy* portraits a variation of family dissipation and loss: Sergeant Leo lost his son prior to the Purge-night, Eva Sanchez' father sacrifices himself for the well-being of his daughter and granddaughter, and while Liz and Shane are about to file for divorce, the group witnesses a family feud in the sheltered home of Eva's friend Tanya. *The Purge: Election Year* starts with Senator Charlie Roan losing her entire family in one Purge-night. It is most notably the first film, however, which also includes a reactionary or conservative motif: The strong, patriarchal leader as an elementary figure for the well-being of the family. After the father and head of the family, James Sandin, dies, the black foreigner assumes the dominant father figure who protects the family until the night is over (cf. Christopher 64).

However, the most relevant horror film characteristic of the *Purge* films is the mirroring of societal fears (cf. Worland 266). The stereotypical home invasion of *The Purge* reflects a disruption of boundaries, as the "home invaders embody the 'contentious internal liminality' that exists in/outside the homestead and homeland" (Bhabha, cited in Fiddler 296). *The Purge: Election Year* addresses the American anxiety over the impeccability of unswayable democratic elections. Overarching the franchise, however, is the pervasive fear of poverty and social or economic decline. Bitel notes the prevalent "bourgeois insecurity" (88), Christopher characterizes this as a crumbling "American dream of upward mobility" (64), Rampetzreiter identifies the fear of downward social movement (Rampetzreiter). For the biopolitical implications, the angst of descending into the socio-economic underclass is an important aspect for understanding the portrayal of low-income classes in the films. The franchise's criticism of economic matters moreover remains a dominant element in the analytic reception of the films, as these issues are rather saliently depicted: "The film is not subtle in this regard" (Christopher 64). The first two films, however, "conclude in aperture" (ibid.) of an apparent irreversibility of the existence of the Purge-night and the economic system of "predatory capitalism" (*The Purge: Election Year* 00:15:20) which the Purge-night enforces.

5) The *Purge*: A Biopolitical Night

While Foucault says that a permanent purification, a "ständige Reinigung" (quoted in Magiros 26), becomes a "grundlegendene Dimension der gesellschaftlichen Normalisierung" (ibid.) of biopolitics, the *Purge* franchise reduces this purification to

one night, only to display in those twelve hours of the Purge-night an extreme incarnation of regulating the population. It is an isolated, demographic approach to normalize the population through eradication of the economically negative deviants to unburden society and thus to invigorate the social body writ large. The *Purge* films embody most brutally how Foucault claims that "the death of the other [...] will make life in general [...] healthier and purer" (Foucault 2004: 255): The slogan of the New Founding Fathers (NFFA), "Purge and purify!" (*The Purge: Election Year* 07:54), connects directly the act of killing others with purification and with a healthier American population. Moreover, the life of the citizens does not only become better, but also safer. The first film, *The Purge* specifically attributes this increase of public safety to the death of the Purge-night's victims, thanking them "for their sacrifices" (*The Purge* 01:19:58). The consequences of this regulating and normalizing Purge-night are presented in the introduction of each film: Crime is at an "all-time low" (*The Purge* 00:01:03) and "virtually non-existent" (*The Purge: Anarchy* 00:01:00), while unemployment has come down to one percent (ibid.). In general, every year, "fewer and fewer people live below the poverty line"[14] (ibid.), indicating less poverty and a superior population development. Normalization through cutting off the economically lower percentage of the population seemingly successfully hefts the national median income and wealth.

Similar to biopolitics, statistics play a significant role in the *Purge* films,[15] as mostly experts are used for expositional information. More importantly, experts and their expert knowledge (cf. Oksala 38) seem to have a strong influence on the decision-makers (cf. Lemke 2007: 108). The trailer for *The First Purge* reveals that it is a psychologist, Dr. Updale, who comes up with the concept of the *Purge*, working together with governmental officials to implement the "psychological experiment" (*The First Purge* 00:00:47). In *The Purge*, the criminologist Tommy Aagaard provides the viewer with information about the Purge-night in a background-radio and the expert Dr. Buynak is already mentioned in ch. 4.3. Following this trust in expert knowledge, statistical data is also used as a knockout argument: The NFFA's candidate Edwidge Owens states in a presidential debate that "the stats are

[14] From a sociological point of view, this information is puzzling: Even if the killed citizens in the Purge-night are overwhelmingly rather poor individuals, a proportionally calculated part of the population below the poverty line should include as many persons the day after the Purge as before - only with a risen poverty line.

[15] *The Purge* includes a strange observation of the son's obsession with his vital data and biological statistics (11:50). However, it is not further commented on by other members of the family.

undeniable" (*The Purge: Election Year* 00:06:47) and already in *The Purge* the most important thing about the concept of the Purge-night seems to be "the undeniable fact [that] this is working" (*The Purge* 00:21:44) – and not whether it is morally reprehensible or not. The violence is justified through statistics and through experts and thus explained as reasonable. The positive effects of this violence are therefore argumentatively undeniable – and in a way vindicated as purely rational. Once again referring back to Foucault, he claimed that the connection of rationality and violence is the most dangerous element of the latter:

> Das Gefährlichste an der Gewalt ist gerade ihre Rationalität. Natürlich ist Gewalt schlechthin schrecklich. Aber ihren festen Grund und ihre Beständigkeit erhält die Gewalt durch die Art von Rationalität, die wir einsetzen. Man hat gesagt, wenn wir in einer Welt der Vernunft lebten, könnten wir uns von der Gewalt befreien. Das ist vollkommen falsch. Gewalt und Vernunft sind nicht unvereinbar (Foucault 2005: 49)

The films suggest that the most reasonable solution for reducing exploding crime rates after a huge, quadruple-dip recession and full stock market crash (cf. *The Purge* 00:21:44) was to introduce the Purge-night and that this introduction of violence was rationally and logically speaking the most effective and most harmless way to protect the overall population and improve the conditions of life. James Sandin commemorates in *The Purge* how "bad it was, Charlie. The poverty, all the crime. This night saved our country" (00:17:40), so for James Sandin, the connection of a *rational purification through violence* seems plausible.

Although some critics recognize elements of biopolitical reasoning behind the concept of the films' Purge-night, no one draws the direct connection to Foucault. The fact that several reviews still make use of similar terminology as it is used in biopolitics shows how the *Purge* films embody central elements of a biopolitical society. One review mentions "regulating the population" as a central part of the films' concept (Felperin), Christopher analyzes the "controlled cultural catharsis" of the night as "eradicating undesirable populations and demographics" (63), whereas Rampetzreiter reviews that the film draws a parallel to the "NS-Rassenhygiene" (Rampetzreiter). Eventually, the films themselves subtly resemble Foucault's descriptions of biopower from time to time: Foucault calls biopower "a power organized around the management of life" (Foucault 1978: 147), while the paramilitary's leader "Big Daddy" explains to Sergeant Leo in *The Purge: Anarchy* that the Purge-night makes "things manageable for us" (01:32:35). Regaining and maintaining control over the population, over the life-conditions of the society, is the biopolitical aim of the Purge-night. For this aim, it is foundational to violently regulate

the population: For the state, killing has become vital for the continuation of control over biological life, keeping the "population under control", as one woman in *The Purge*: *Anarchy* vociferously proclaims in a gibberish seizure (00:41:20).

Biopolitical regulation of the population in a form of state racism is done in two steps: The sole introduction of the Purge-night leads to an unequal chance of surviving. The wealthy part of the population "can afford protection" (*The Purge* 00:16:41), whereas the "poor can't afford to protect themselves" (*The Purge* 00:03:20). The resulting assault on the unprotected by parts of the population itself leaves "more low-income people [...] killed during the Purge than anyone else" (*The Purge: Election Year* 00:06:57). This stage is comparable to what Foucault called "indirect murder": "The fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people" (Foucault 2004: 256). The state refuses to protect any member of society for one night, exposing basically everyone to death, but especially increasing the risk of death for the part of the population which is socio-economically left behind. The *second* step is the switch from passive to active, meaning the direct involvement of the government in the killings of the Purge-night. This is particularly developed in the second installment *The Purge: Anarchy*, in which governmentally funded killer-trucks attack certain poor milieus in entire apartment blocks. Judging from the trailer of *The First Purge*, this will also become a central aspect of the fourth film.

In the first stage, the temporary suspension of government duties such as hospital services and policing exposes the underclass to risks. All three films show how poor people are killed by other members of society, which is to say non-governmental actors: either by other rather poor individuals or by the wealthy – up to the point of groups of affluent people using the Purge-night as a mere hunting sport for their amusement, as seen in *The Purge: Anarchy* (01:13:15). Particularly homeless people fall an easy prey and many of the incidents in the films revolve around those cases. *The Purge*'s premise is the conflict between the elitist "young, very educated guys and gals" (00:33:38) and a "homeless man" (00:38:52), their "target" (00:33:49). The leader of the masked group is very explicit about who their targets in general are and more specifically, who are not. He describes the Sandins as "good folk, just like us. One of the 'haves'" (00:33:33), and "fine folk" (00:57:38) and affirms that he intends not to "kill our own" (00:35:25). This group is instead aggressively seeking poor and/or homeless people to slay them while sparing

moneyed parts of the population. *The Purge: Anarchy* includes a scene in an underground tunnel in which several homeless people try to "make it through the night" (00:53:54) when assaulters in heavy-armed cars charge at them with flame-throwers in order to completely annihilate all those who hide in the tunnels. One could argue that the homeless are more "close at hand" and "vulnerable" (Girard 2) than the wealthy and therefore serve only as the necessary surrogate victim. After all, when the barriers of the Sandin's house come down, the neighbors enter the scene and attack the Sandins *and* the elitist group of young rich people (*The Purge* 01:12:53) due to the simplified accessibility of the Sandin's home after the conflict. However, *The Purge* in particular shows the outspoken loathing of the homeless, whom the leader of the group calls "piece of filth" (00:57:38) and a "grotesque menace to our just society" (00:33:54). When the leader of the group eventually kills James Sandin, the former's question "was his life really worth yours?" (01:06:16) implies a hierarchy of the worth of lives, with homeless lives ranging on the bottom of the hierarchy. The 'Purgers' not only kill the poor and homeless due to the accessibility of any sacrificial scapegoat, but due to the societal detestation of the latter's class.

Although *The Purge: Election Year* parenthetically tries to make ethnicity and skin color a subject of discussion ("You don't sneak up on black people" on Purge-night [00:25:10], "my negro" [01:31:56]), the *Purge* franchise rather follows a more Foucauldian take on modern racism: It is not a war of races, of different nations, but a "social war" or "internal war" (Foucault 2007: 377) – a war against every individual who does not contribute to the survival or the well-being of the race, or the social body as a whole. As A.O. Scott points out, it is "not really a parable of black against white" (Scott, A.O.); the black skin color of the homeless stranger in *The Purge* is not even mentioned or alluded to *once* in the film, the disdain of the leader of the group is purely based on the economic hierarchy. The latter reviles the homeless stranger with a great range of insults such as "dirty, homeless pig" (00:33:50), "filthy swine" (00:45:14), "piece of filth" (00:57:38), but makes no reference to his skin color whatsoever. The viewer also learns that the homeless stranger used to serve in the military, as his military dog tag is prominently featured in the camera shots of 00:51:08 and 00:55:33. The tag should logically be under the tape with which the homeless stranger has been trussed up in this shots but remains in focus, indicating the director wanted to show this tag explicitly. His *past* merits to society have become

insignificant, his burden to the population is now the criterion by which he is measured. *The Purge*'s expert Tommy Aagaard identifies the class of such people as the homeless stranger as the "so-called 'non-contributing members' of society" (00:19:32). The *Purge* franchise is not primarily racist in an ethnical sense, but displays an "all-out class warfare" (Tobias Scott; cf. O'Sullivan); most of the homeless who are being attacked in the shots of 00:53:54 are white (*The Purge: Anarchy*) – they are killed due to their homelessness, regardless of their skin color. As mentioned in ch. 4.2), Foucault's concept of "'racism against the abnormal' [...] dispense[s] with race" (Foucault quoted in Taylor 749) and although Fiaccadori objects that "'race war' can [not] simply be equated with 'class war'" (162), the racism in the *Purge* films is nearly solely economical. Still Harsanti is to a certain degree right in his observation that in *The Purge: Election Year* "most of her protectors are black or Hispanic, and nearly all of those running her down are white" (Harsanti). However, black or Hispanic are rather depicted as markers for otherness and further for a certain socio-economic class here. African Americans are "six times more likely to be incarcerated than white Americans" (The Sentencing Project to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, quoted in Denike 120). Hence in terms of contributing e.g. economically to society the film rather implies in an over-clichéd way different statuses of wealth instead of ethnic antagonism. Historically speaking, racism, for example in the American Progressive Era, included economic considerations as well. Lynchings were "sometimes also economically motivated" (Bedermann 54), but also for the pioneers of eugenics "pecuniary calculation was indeed a guiding principle"[16] (King 181), as well as for anti-immigration politicians in America (cf. ibid. 174). For the *Purge* cosmos, ethnicity is not explicitly a subject of hate; rather the economic situation has become the primary focus. This future dystopian society is still structurally racist, as people of color are shown to be unevenly more likely to be pushed to the lower socio-economic classes during the rest of the year. However, in the Purge-night itself, ethnicity, religion or gender are reduced solely to the economic status – a status that has been produced prior to the Purge-night.

The economic focus is continued so far as that the *economy* as such partly takes over the function of society: Once again, criminologist Tommy Aagaard describes benefits of the eradication of the poor, needy, and sick as "unburdening the

[16] Besides the fact that "long-Term reduction in the number of such [feebleminded, moral delinquent, degenerates] citizens would [...] result in a more robust population" (King 167).

economy" (*The Purge* 00:19:32). The national economy has replaced the category race, the social body as such. Consequently, the biopolitical state in the *Purge* intends to manage their economic spending, in this case their spending for social care: If those who need financial support are killed by other members of the population in the Purge-night, the government spends "less welfare, less healthcare, less housing" (*The Purge: Election Year* 00:02:52): One member of the resistance comes straight to the point: "legalized murder [...] decrease[s] the poor population, which in turn keeps the government's spending down" (ibid.).

Now, both *The Purge: Anarchy* and the trailer of *The First Purge* show a crucial turning point in the tactic of the government leading to direct involvement. In *The First Purge*, a government official observes surveillance-camera live-footage with the psychologist Dr. Updale while most of the citizens in the Purge-night celebrate instead of killing each other. "Parties? You predicted a much higher level of participation" (00:01:30) he comments. Later we see Dr. Updale accusing him of sending "soldiers into the island disguised as citizens" (00:01:57), to which the official replies: "This country needs for this to work!" (ibid.). Concluding from this sequence, the government previously hoped for a violent social war, resulting in multiple deaths of low-income people to cut the costs of social welfare. When that scenario does not occur, government soldiers are sent in, either as 'agents provocateurs' or simply to aggressively reduce the number of people in the low-income district themselves, if the killings do not occur 'naturally'. This is deemed necessary to save the country, its population and economy. A similar narrative is introduced in the last minutes of *The Purge: Anarchy*, when the leader of one killer-truck, Big Daddy, explains the nature of those assassination squads:

> Tonight, we take lives. We make things manageable for us. Unfortunately, the citizens aren't killing enough. So, we supplement it all to keep things balanced. It's important work the NFFA does, and we can't have any interference. (01:32:35)

The connection to the leading party NFFA which forms the government is made with his focus of first person plural; with "we" and "us", he refers to the government. To underpin this connection, *The Purge: Election Year* unambiguously names those task force trucks "government trucks" (01:11:27) and *The Purge: Anarchy* also establishes the connection of those trucks to the government rather notably (00:48:38). The important phrase in Big Daddy's speech to Sergeant Leo is "to keep things balanced". The regulatory mechanism of biopower, according to Foucault, aims at establishing "an equilibrium, maintain[ing] an average, establish[ing] a sort of

homeostasis, and compensat[ing] for variations" (Foucault 2004: 246), in short, keeping the population balanced. The biopolitical state of the *Purge* cosmos uses the Purge-night to obliterate those who negatively unbalance the social body in order to counterbalance. After learning that the mere exposure of poor individuals to death does not tip over the scale, or in other words, that the decrease of the poor is too insufficient, well-equipped government forces are entrusted with the task to kill ample "non-contributing members of society" (*The Purge* 00:19:32) or even those who do not contribute *sufficiently*. Foucault dubs this lethal government method "Thanatopolitik":

> "Da die Bevölkerung nichts anderes ist als das, worüber der Staat wacht, in seinem eigenen Interesse wohlverstanden, kann der Staat sie bei Bedarf auch massakrieren. Die Thanatopolitik ist so die Rückseite der Biopolitik." (quoted in Bertani 239)

In the *Purge*-universe, the need to massacre the state's own population apparently exists. In a way, this is what Lauren Berlant in other circumstances has coined “a particularly brutal mode of [...] *hygienic governmentality"* (quoted in Orford 215, emphasis in original), which establishes the notion of an "abject population threaten[ing] the common good" (ibid.). The killer-trucks of the *Purge*-government now target that "abject population". *The Purge: Anarchy* shows multifacetedly why Eva and Cali, together with the entire apartment block they live in, are targeted by the task forces. Waitress and single-mom Eva despairs that she "can't afford [her sick father's] medicine much longer" (00:03:04); her daughter Cali asks on Eva's return whether Eva convinced her boss Mrs. Crawley to raise the salary (00:09:23), stating that they had practiced the dialogue beforehand, indicating the economic importance and the oppressive financial situation they are in. Eventually, Eva's terminally ill father Rico sells himself to a rich family as a sacrificial purge victim to support his struggling daughter and granddaughter with 100.000 $. Their housing block is then laid under siege by a government truck equipped with a heavy, armor-piercing Gatling-gun and accompanied by several heavy armed soldiers wearing riot gear and carrying specialized tools such as a heavy circular saw to penetrate the fortified entrance doors. However, the soldiers do not *personally* target Eva and Cali: When both are dragged out, the viewer gets to see how every single other apartment in the house is raided as well (00:31:09). It is not the individual who is being attacked, it is their milieu of low-income apartment blocks. Later, when the surviving group around Sergeant Leo discovers an empty government truck, this is presented more drastically: Monitors show which blocks in the city are being targeted, a task list for

the killer-trucks. On these monitors Eva and Cali are demonstrated that they are „being targeted for something, along with all these other buildings. Here, here. All over the city" (00:48:38). A few seconds earlier, the survival group approaching the truck overhears the radio communication indicating that this truck is not an isolated instrument of regulation, but part of a centrally organized machinery of truck task forces. A birds-eye perspective shot (00:58:19) shows two trucks driving side by side on a highway, with a radio commander giving orders where to strike next from a command center the viewer never gets to see.

The snippets of radio communication nonetheless manage to transmit the impression that the government controls the entire network of surveillance cameras from this command center. The NFFA's henchman Earl Danzinger[17] orders to get "access to every surveillance camera in the city" (*The Purge: Anarchy* 01:06:09); in *The Purge: Anarchy*, on the survival group's encounter with an empty government truck, the viewer accompanies the group realizing that the government operates those trucks. This connection is hinted at since the government controls all cameras: "'Traffic cams are controlled by the government. How did they get into these? I mean, who are these people?' – 'Maybe you just answered your own question'" (00:48:38). *The Purge: Anarchy* also includes how the – even in the Purge-night – illegal use of explosives causes a voice to proclaim repeatedly that "the use of explosives higher than Class 4 is prohibited on Purge Night [...] You will be prosecuted" (01:23:00) over loudspeakers, even though the event takes place *inside* and not in public. The government seems to pedantically monitor everything during the Purge-night in such a continuous way that it closely resembles Bentham's *Panopticon*[18] (cf. Foucault 2007: 66). Moreover, the last scene of *The Purge: Anarchy* shows that the governmental Purge-night control team can inspect official files regardless of the content: The surveillance cameras capture Sergeant Leo's license plate and the surveillance system connects his identity to court files, which indicate that he recently

[17] Intended or not, it is a peculiar coincidence that the most prominent real-life connotation of the name "Danzinger" refers to Rainer Danzinger, who released a book in 2015, one year prior to the publication of *The Purge: Election Year*, about the rather biopolitical NS-euthanasia of mentally disabled patients in Austria.

[18] That is a point every film critic seems to miss (cf. e.g. the YouTube series "Everything Wrong With The Purge: Anarchy In 16 Minutes Or Less"): Nearly every dismissive comment about the *Purge*'s concept deplores the sudden stop of violence at 7am – claiming that nobody could monitor when exactly the assault took place, whether it is 06:59 or 07:01 am. Yet, the use of explosives even in a non-public surrounding in *The Purge: Anarchy* is shown to spark an immediate official response of persecution. When the state of exception ceases and the Purge-night concludes at 7am, citizens can be sure that they will be persecuted for overstepping the boundary due to the rigorous surveillance – or at least, citizens cannot be sure that they are *not* monitored at any given moment.

lost a legal dispute over the death of his son in an accident involving drunk driving. "It was easy to see where you were headed tonight" (01:32:10), Big Daddy tells Leo, showing a basic understanding of the legal case. That shows that the government is in control of all branches of power and the thorough surveillance leaves every individual a transparent citizen.

In an Agambian reading, the dystopian, Purge-night-ridden USA appear as a large, temporary camp. Every citizen is basically reduced to bare life, or turned into "lebende Leichnahme" (quoted in Lemke 2013: 168), following Arendt, as there is no crime that could be committed against an individual that evokes any punishment (cf. Agamben 180) - the Purge-night makes it possible to kill without committing murder, in Agambian terms (cf. ibid. 148). Despite the implication of the title *The Purge: Anarchy*, the Purge-night is a riot which is still framed by certain laws and functioning structures. The exception is based on its inclusion in the law. "The state of exception is not anarchy or chaos because an order still exists" (Oksala 30) and this order is rather prominent in the *Purge* franchise: The soldiers in the government-trucks still do their "duty" (*The Purge: Anarchy* 00:47:47) and follow strict hierarchical orders[19] without running berserk, weapons of class IV are still prohibited and at least in the first two installments certain government officials are exempt from the Purge-night as they are granted immunity.[20] One reviewer notes that "the subtitle here is ironic" (Newman), because the law only "*seems* to be relaxed" (ibid, emphasis added) although 'anarchy' refers to a total lack of government.

Particularly *The Purge: Election Year* moreover includes strong references to National Socialists and, more subtly, to the highest stage of 'camp' with which Agamben deals in *Homo Sacer:* concentration camps. The opening scene of *The Purge: Election Year* shows in a flashback how a lunatic 'Purger' confronts the family of Charlie Roan who survives that night and later enters politics to abolish the Purge-night due to this experience. The 'Purger' asks to pick one member of the family to

[19] In *The Purge: Anarchy*, three (!) different characters note that the killer-truck task force "looks like an army" (00:26:16; 00:36:45; 00:48:50); the repetition shows how important the remaining presence of institutional structures during the Purge-night are for the concept of the films. *The Purge: Anarchy* even lets a soldier dramatically emphasize that they are "just doing our duty" (00:47:47) with his last breaths, which would seem slightly over-excessive, if the implications were not as important for the film as they are.

[20] The frequent use of "immunity" in the *Purge* films is interesting, because it is ambiguous: On the one hand it refers to diplomatic immunity, on the other hand the biological level of immunity through vaccination resembles the nature of the Purge-night in a nutshell: Immunization "consists in the protection of life through the contradiction of it; *the protection of life requires a dose of the evil that threatens it*, precisely to generate the protection required against that evil" (Mills 91, emphasis added). In the *Purge*, society acquires an immunity against crime through a "dose of evil" once a year in the Purge-night.

survive the night and calls it "Mommy's choice": "Mommy, which one of you will survive this year's Purge?" (00:02:07). This is a reference to the 1979 novel "Sophie's choice", in which Sophie, a Polish concentration camp detainee, has to choose which of her children will be spared. Arendt also uses a similar image of moral dilemma in a concentration camp in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1973: 452). *The Purge: Election Year*'s later references to Nazism, however, are the opposite of subtle: When Earl Danzinger is introduced, he carries an array of symbols as tattoos on his skin and on his uniform, including a "White Power" patch (00:31:00), bent-hook swastikas, a swastika in an Iron Cross, a Celtic cross, the sigrune insignia and the KKK's *Mystic Insignia Of A Klansman* (00:31:47). The bigger picture of *The Purge: Election Year* is thus the attack on and chase of individuals without any rights by organized (Neo-)Nazis in a camp-like surrounding.

In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault explains that studying "liberalism [is] the general framework of biopolitics" (Foucault 2008: 383). Eventually, besides the biopolitical carnage of the Purge-night, the neo-liberalistic symbolism of the *Purge* franchise is therefore noteworthy. Although the government uses the Purge-night to regulate the population, the night is overall a temporary instance of enormous deregulation. Public services such as policing, fire-fighters and ambulances are suspended, which leads to a privatization of such things as security. Lemke explains this rather neo-liberal commoditization:

> Die Kommodifizierung ehemals öffentlicher Sicherheitsleistungen [...] transformiert das Kollektivgut Sicherheit in eine beliebige Ware, die dem Spiel von Angebot und Nachfrage unterliegt [...] Im Rahmen dieses tendenziellen Übergangs von der staatlichen Gefahrenabwehr zur privaten Sicherheitsvorsorge verlagert sich die Verantwortung für die Verbrechensprävention, die zunehmend zu einem Problem potentieller Opfer wird. [...] Falls sie dennoch zu Verbrechensopfern werden, müssen sie sich deshalb fragen lassen, ob sie die Risiken nicht fehlerhaft kalkuliert und ihre Opferrolle teilweise oder ganz selbst verschuldet haben. (Lemke 2007: 56f)

The Purge: Anarchy shows how Eva is offered paid help in the Purge-night: "You need some protection tonight?" (00:05:39). The commoditization opens up a market mechanism of supply and demand, including people 'selling' the product 'safety' in a street-vendor like fashion. On the other hand, the demand for insurances sends the covering-costs to skyrocketing heights (cf. *The Purge: Election Year* 00:15:46). In this Purge-night which follows a "market mentality" (*The Purge: Anarchy* 01:24:13), the economically disadvantaged cannot keep up the costs for private security when public security is suspended.

In an individualizing step of privatization, *The Purge: Election Year* shows Laney setting up a private emergency service, while Sergeant Leo and Senator Roan encounter a private hearse, calling itself "Purge Sanitation Service" with the slogan "keep Washington clean" (00:38:06), somewhat resembling a private garbage collection. Although it seems like those two services operate non-monetarily, most organized groups in the installments *The Purge: Anarchy* and *The Purge: Election Year* work due to financial incentives, unlike the assault group of *The Purge*. A group of security agents is hired to risk their lives in protection of Senator Roan, only to be slaughtered by a group of Neo-Nazis who are paid to risk their lives capturing the Senator (*The Purge: Election Year*). The van-gang who captures the survival group around Sergeant Leo does not intend to purge, instead they use their captives to earn money, selling them to a party for rich people (*The Purge: Anarchy*). On this Party[21], the viewer gets to see several servants serving food or playing Piano (01:13:15), and eventually even risking and losing their lives for their affluent employers. The only motivation for the servants in this scene to not run amok when the resistance attacks the party can only be their promised salary; there remain no other ordering structures in place in this situation during the Purge-night as economic reasons to keep the servants compliant. One can see how, apart from the few governmental structures (Killer-Trucks, video-surveillance, restricting laws for classes of weapons and government officials), the market with all its demands and its profit orientation keeps the framing structure of purging America. *The Purge: Election Year* also shows how globalization takes hold of the Purge-night: "Murder tourists" from all over the world come to the USA to participate in the bloodshed (00:10:45). The *Purge* franchise thus not only pictures the cold-blooded biopolitical consequences of the Purge-night, it also paints a very neo-liberal world built on supply and demand, commoditization, globalization, and privatization. Financial reasoning goes as far as risking and giving one's live for whichever cause pays the most.

6) Conclusion

The *Purge* franchise lays out a sinister dystopian world that relies on temporarily legalized crimes to reduce crime rates the rest of the year. It's an auto-immunization of the social body through the evil within society itself, a way of "destroying matter

[21] The Party seems like an alluded reference to *The Masque of the Red Death*: A secluded group of noble/rich people gather in order to escape the chaos outside to have fun - only to fall prey to the same chaos that is happening outside.

through the exhaustion of the evil it contains, of committing every possible sin, going to the very end of the domain of evil" (Foucault 2007: 195). In the narrative of the films, the concept is explained as fulfilling a cathartic function, ridding the population of destructive desires. The idea of the *Purge*, however, can also be explained as serving a scapegoat function of depressurizing social tensions, with those unable to protect themselves as the ones "close at hands" (Girard 2). However, exploring the function of the *Purge* for the government, the fact that poor and homeless people are far more likely to be killed is not circumstantial but at the very core the reason for the introduction of the institutional *Purge*. In an biopolitical attempt to regulate the population in order to strengthen it economically as well as in terms of social cohesion, the government exposes its poorer individuals to death. After learning that the mere exposure to death does not entirely fulfill the objective of reducing a certain milieu of less wealthy citizens, the government actively attacks those deemed "non-contributing members of society" (*The Purge* 00:19:32); the state massacres parts of its own population. The films frequently underline the government's need to act this way: It has become a vital function for the persistence of the population in its entirety. The displayed carnages of the films do not serve to protect a sovereign power. Instead, the purification of the race, of the social body is the central purpose. Consequently, the *Purge* portrays a, in a Foucauldian sense, racist social structure in which, instead of ethnicity or religion, primarily the socio-economic status determines the worth of life of every individual. The ruthlessness with which individuality of each citizen is neglected due to the fact that only larger regulating effects for the nation-wide population are considered by the government underscores the structural, biopolitical strategy of those in power. Furthermore, the *Purge* shows how neo-liberal processes play a major role in the Purge-nights. Instead of morals, financial reasoning guides the actions of many Purge-night participants

The films remain interesting points of departure for further works, as for example the process of othering and the racist structures during the rest of the year pose worthwhile research topics. The rumored television series is supposed to address the period between each Purge-night, thus providing more insight into topics of social structure outside of the state of exception. Moreover, a capitalist-economic reading of the films could address those questions which have been raised by reviews:

> This, of course, makes no economic sense [...]. The film defies one of the fundamental rules of capitalism: Exploitation of the proletariat may be well and good, but don't execute them all. (O'Sullivan)

While displaying a cold-blooded, seemingly rational government, the *Purge* franchise prompts the individual viewers to evaluate their strategy in a fictional night in which all crime is legal: Should they purge or stay hidden? Should they commit "every possible sin" (Foucault 2007: 195) and seek purification, if it helps to regulate society, should they go to the "very end of the domain of evil" (ibid.) in a social war characterized by hate for low-income citizens? Would they oppose the government's violent regulation of the population, even when this Purge-night reduces crimes and unemployment rates during the rest of the year? The franchise shows how many people choose to sin in order to purify, "sin to infinity" (ibid.) for a healthier life. Homicide and manslaughter becomes the vital foundation for the continued existence of the national population of the *Purge*.

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