In the end, though, this book would have been impossible for me to
conceive or write without the everyday provocation, friendship, and insight of
Rich Doyle, who's convinced me over the past decade of plant life's crucial
biopolitical importance—among so many other things. His forceful under-
standing of plant life is all over every page herein. At the end of the day Rich is
certainly "the better craftsman" of plant theory, and this book is for him.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AK</td>
<td><em>The Archaeology of Knowledge</em>, by Michel Foucault</td>
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<td>ATT</td>
<td><em>The Animal That Therefore I Am</em>, by Jacques Derrida</td>
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<td>BS</td>
<td><em>The Beast and the Sovereign</em>, 2 vols., by Jacques Derrida</td>
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<td>BT</td>
<td><em>Being and Time</em>, by Martin Heidegger</td>
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<td>DA</td>
<td><em>De anima</em>, by Aristotle</td>
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<td>DR</td>
<td><em>Difference and Repetition</em>, by Gilles Deleuze</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td><em>Glas</em>, by Jacques Derrida</td>
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<td>HM</td>
<td><em>History of Madness</em>, by Michel Foucault</td>
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<td>HS</td>
<td><em>Homo Sacer</em>, by Giorgio Agamben</td>
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<td>OT</td>
<td><em>The Order of Things</em>, by Michel Foucault</td>
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<td>PA</td>
<td><em>Parts of Animals</em>, by Aristotle</td>
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<td>SZ</td>
<td><em>Sein und Zeit</em>, by Martin Heidegger</td>
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<td>TP</td>
<td><em>A Thousand Plateaus</em>, vol. 2, by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze</td>
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<td>WFS</td>
<td><em>The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics</em>, by Martin Heidegger</td>
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<td>&quot;WM&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;White Mythology,&quot; by Jacques Derrida</td>
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<td>WP</td>
<td><em>What Is Philosophy?</em> by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari</td>
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THE FIRST BIRTH OF BIOPOWER
From Plant to Animal Life in Foucault

IF CROSS-DISCIPLINARY MOVEMENTS in the North American university function like financial instruments (which, of course, they do and they don’t), the strongest “buy” orders of recent years would have to come from the burgeoning discourse surrounding biopower and the related body of work dedicated to animal studies. I suppose this book itself attests to continuing scholarly interest in biopower. And animal studies, for its part, has made a strong pitch to be the “next big thing” in the academy, or so the New York Times has announced.¹

These two emerging fields of practice are, of course, intimately related: if biopolitical studies began by pointing out that questions pertaining to human “life” have become the political topics of the modern era (revolving around practices of identity, health, and sexuality), animal studies steps in to show how that notion of human-centered biopower is itself based on an originary exclusion and abjection of its other, animal life. In classic deconstructive form (Jacques Derrida is in fact one of the most often cited figures), animal studies shows how the privileged term of biopower (human life itself) is made possible and remains hegemonic through its illegitimate forgetting of animal life: the hidden suffering and slaughter of animals on the factory farm literally makes the on-the-go meals available for the Homo economicus of biopower, today’s busy lifestyle consumer.

Not surprisingly, Michel Foucault’s work figures quite prominently in these emerging fields of study: Foucault of course coins the word biopower in The History of Sexuality, Volume 1. And in his lecture courses touching on the concept
individuals, charged with the task of creating and maintaining our lives. And that power-saturated task is performed not solely at scattered institutional sites but virtually everywhere, all the time.

And the ethical challenge presented by animal studies arrives hot on the heels of a triumphant human biopolitics: most centrally, of course, there would seem to be serious concerns about the ethics of sacrificing animal life solely for human benefit (under a regime dominated by an intense concern for "life," why do we live and they die?), not to mention the sustainability consequences (both for individual health and the life of the ecosphere) that are being wrought by the huge corporate animal farms required to feed a growing global hunger for animal flesh.4

In any case it seems clear that Foucault's texts of the 1970s and 1980s constitute linchpin sites for both biopolitical analysis and the related fields that cluster under the rubric animal studies.5 We should note, though, right from the beginning that Foucault seems to be of more use within contemporary biopolitical theory and practice than in the field of animal studies, where his work on biopower serves less as a common touchstone to build on than as a kind of negative jumping-off point—similar to the way that Theodor Adorno's supposed dismissal of popular culture served for many years as an enabling horizon for academic work in cultural studies.6 In short, Foucault is routinely chastised for not paying enough (or really any) attention to the question of animality within his discussions of life as biopower. Most infamously, Foucault's work has been charged with "species chauvinism"—Donna Haraway's accusation in _When Species Meet_. Haraway, in fact, reveals that her book was spawned by the realization that Foucault's critical project didn't go far enough: "I had read Michel Foucault, and I knew all about biopower and the proliferative powers of biological discourses. . . . I had read _Birth of the Clinic_ and _The History of Sexuality_, and I had written about the technobiopolitics of cyborgs. I felt I could not be surprised by anything. But I was wrong. Foucault's own species chauvinism had fooled me into forgetting that dogs too might live in the domains of technobiopower."7 Perhaps, as I will suggest below, if she had spent more time with _The Order of Things_ and _History of Madness_, things would have turned out differently.

Foucault is then given credit in animal studies for calling attention to the central question of life within modern political existence, but he's just as quickly disciplined for confining his analysis to humans, thereby doubling down on the nefarious ethical exclusion of animal life from the discussion. Nicole
Shukin writes in Animal Capital, for example: "The pivotal insight enabled by Foucault—that biopower augurs nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is, the entry of phenomena of the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power"—bumps against its own internal limit at the species line. The biopolitical analyses he has inspired, in turn, are constrained by their reluctance to pursue power's effects beyond the production of the human social and/or species life and into the zoo-politics of animal capital." There are undoubtedly a whole series of Foucauldian ways that one could respond to this kind of claim. I suppose the most obvious is that if Foucault is a booster for the human species—offering sunny thoughts like "man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end"—I'd shudder to think what critics of the species might think. But rather than pursue this kind of defense (as Foucault himself insisted, polemical back-and-forth argumentation is unlikely to lead us "beyond" our present consensus), I'd like to take a different tack. One way to go would be to suggest avenues whereby Foucault's work on human biopower could be harnessed for thinking about animal life. As Stephen Thierman writes in 'Apparatuses of Animality: Foucault Goes to a Slaughterhouse,' insofar as "Foucault did not write" extensively about nonhuman animals, perhaps "it is left to those of us who think his methods and conceptual tools can be fruitfully employed to explore our relationships with other animals to fill in the blanks." And there's already plenty of work being done in this emergent area of research, analyses inspired by Foucault that interrogate the question of life across the human-animal divide.

However productive that path might be, I'd like to take a somewhat different direction here, by trying to think about new trajectories in Foucauldian biopower not so much by extending his analyses into animal formations and institutions that he didn't study (contemporary corporate farming practices, genetic manipulation, the companion animal phenomenon, and so forth) but by looking at neglected formulations concerning animality and the emergence of biopower in his own work. I would begin simply by noting that Foucault hardly ignored animals altogether, especially in his early archaeological work. History of Madness (1961), for example, contains a substantial backstory of reflection on the myriad historical ways that "the animal realm ... serves to reveal the dark rage and sterile folly that lurks in the heart of mankind." Foucault in fact insists that much of the discourse on madness, in the classical age and beyond, "took its face from the mask of the beast. ... Madness ... was for the classical age a direct relation between man and his animality, without reference to a be-

yond and without appeal" (HM 147–48). Human madness, as Foucault demonstrates, was for a very long time understood and treated as a kind of animality.

Even more centrally, an extended interrogation of animality figures in what we might call the first birth of biopower within Foucault's corpus, in 1966's The Order of Things. To begin reexamining the Foucauldian emergence of life as a central concern for power, one needs merely to cite these controversial lines from that work: "if biology was unknown [in eighteenth-century Europe], there was a very simple reason for it: life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by natural history" (OT 127–28). Of course, this provocation—life did not exist in Europe until the nineteenth century, specifically until 1802, when Lamarck was the first to use the word biology—functions as a bit of a dry run for Foucault's later, seemingly just as "outrageous," idea that homosexuality was invented in 1870, or his declarations that the author, and indeed even "man" itself, are products of recent invention. This type of sentence-level provocation is one of Foucault's characteristic means of dramatizing, in a very stark way, the crucial importance of social and historical emergence. Alongside the Foucauldian pleasure evident in the perversity performed by sentences like "up to the end of the eighteenth century, in fact, life does not exist" (OT 160), there's a consistent philosophical point being advanced: the historical emergence of a new way of handling topic X (here, "life") gives rise to different problematics, different practices, and thereby different objects. A new form of practice literally remakes the (supposedly preexisting) object of the discourse: biology creates, rather than discovers; this object of study called life. This emphasis on discursive emergence constitutes Foucauldian Archaeology 101 and keeps us focused on the most basic terrain for all of Foucault's work: the question of how today is different from yesterday.

In schematic terms Foucault's prey in The Order of Things is the epistemic shift from a classical regime of representation (natural history, where classification and nomination of visible "living things" are the key practices) to a regime of modern knowledge-transcendental life, labor, and language (where the "object" of knowledge is no longer readily available to classification but rather disappears into the shadowy half-light of discursive practice). In the birth of biology the question of life unhinges itself from a practice of representation (the discourse is freed from what Foucault calls the "pure tabulation of things" [OT 131] in natural history's grids) and attaches itself instead to a mode of speculation about this murky thing called life—now understood not as a visible
manifestation of similitude but as the darkly hidden secret that connects living things. This movement from surface to depth signals the decline of natural history and the birth of biology, the emergence of the science of life. And in this movement across spheres, the modern human sciences and their era of transcendentalism begin to replace the representational episteme—just as representation, in its turn, had replaced the early modern regime of fabulation or magic.

And it is here, in the interstices of this grand narrative about knowledge in the West, where animals make their appearance in The Order of Things: "To the Renaissance, the strangeness of animals was a spectacle: it was featured in fairs, in tournaments, in fictitious or real combats, in reconstructions of legends in which the bestiary displayed its ageless fables. The natural history room and the garden, as created in the Classical period, replace the circular procession of the 'show' with the arrangement of a 'table,'... a new way of connecting things both [to] the eye and to discourse" (OT 131). As the historical a priori of representation emerges and later mutates into the era of the human sciences, the "being" of animals changes as well: in the era of representational natural history "the plant and the animal are not seen so much in their organic unity as by the visible patterning of their organs. They are hoofs and paws, fruits and flowers, before being respiratory systems or internal liquids. Natural history traverses an area of the visible... without any internal relation of subordination or organization" (OT 137). For a representational regime it is the visible surface of living things, rather than some buried "organic unity," that is the bearing area of discursive power. Natural history constitutes a series of practices whereby living things—plants and animals—find their proper classification through organization by common visible traits rather than hidden animating principles.

But on Foucault's account, it's with the rise of the transcendentalists, in the era of the human sciences, that animals begin to take priority over plants as the privileged form or figure of life itself. In an era of natural history where knowledge was characterized by "the apparent simplicity of a description of the visible... the area common to words and things constituted a much more accommodating, a much less 'black' grid for plants than for animals" (OT 137). Most animals, simply put, have more hidden, interior space than plants and thereby present a greater volume of "black" or blank space to the gaze of the classifying naturalist. Foucault writes about this era of representation: "Because it was possible to know and to say only within a taxonomic area of visibility, the knowledge of plants was bound to prove more extensive than that of animals" (OT 137), precisely because plants can be pulled up out of the ground, and thereby rendered fully visible, from the tip of the roots to the outermost edges of the flower or leaf.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, however, Foucault traces a mutation of the dominant epistemic procedures—from a representational discourse that maps external similitude and resemblance, to the emergence of a speculative discourse that takes as its object hidden internal processes. In short, we see emerge a discourse that "opposed historical knowledge of the visible to philosophical knowledge of the invisible" (OT 138): knowledge's privileged practices abandon the surface of objects in order to plumb their hidden depths instead. And first and foremost among those transcendental "invisibles" was a little thing we like to call "life": "The naturalist is the man concerned with the structure of the visible world and its denomination according to characters. Not with life" (OT 161), Foucault insists, because life is not representable. Life is in fact a kind of unplumbable depth, animating the organism from a hidden origin somewhere within. This birth of biology—which is to say, the emergence of "life" itself as a bearing area for discursive power and a depth to be explored—constitutes the first birth of biopower, this one in Foucault's work of the mid-1960s.

So, why is this archaeology of biopower important, in terms of using Foucault in the present and maybe leading us toward new directions in the future? Well, I suppose there are myriad answers to that question, but I'd like to suggest one particular line of useful inquiry here, one that also involves a way to respond to the animal studies critique of Foucauldian biopower with which I began this chapter—that Foucault essentially ignores the question of animal life and thereby extends the unearned privileges of human biopower rather than questioning them.

In short, Foucault's work on biopower 1.0 shows that animal life is not in fact jettisoned or abjected at the dawn of humanist biopower in the nineteenth century; instead, animality is fully incorporated into biopower as the template for life itself. As Foucault puts it,

the animal, whose great threat or radical strangeness had been left suspended and as it were disarmed at the end of the Renaissance, discovers fantastic new powers in the nineteenth century. In the interval, Classical nature had given precedence to vegetable values... with all its forms on display, from stem to seed, from root to fruit; with all its secrets made generously visible, the vegetable kingdom formed a pure transparent object for thought as tabulation. But when the characters and structures are arranged in vertical steps toward life—
that sovereign vanishing point, indefinitely distant but constituent—then it is the animal that becomes the privileged form, with its hidden structures, its buried organs, so many invisible functions. . . . If living beings are a classification, the plant is best able to express its limpid essence; but if they are a manifestation of life, the animal is better equipped to make its enigma perceptible. (OT 277)

In short, Foucault argues that with the emergence of the human sciences at the birth of biopower, the animal is not excluded or forgotten but quite the opposite: animality is the dominant apparatus for investigating both what life is and what life does. The living is no longer primarily vegetable (separable and awaiting mere categorization) but understood as evolving, appetite-driven, secret, discontinuous, mendacious, inscrutable, always on the prowl, looking for an opening to break free. As Foucault puts it, "Transferring its most secret essence from the vegetable to the animal kingdom, life has left the tabulated space of order and become wild once more" (OT 277). And this is of course not just a development within the narrow confines of biology. Foucault could in fact cue here the advent of philosophical modernity itself. One might speculate that Hegel's 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* (where human life itself is refashioned as nothing other than unfathomable disorder and animal appetite—in short, desire) shows the way for later nineteenth-century thought, which in turn opens a path directly to our day: from Darwin's evolution of life, through Freud's life of the unconscious, and Nietzsche's life of self-overcoming, all the way to Schumpeter's neoliberal life of creative destruction. All of these formations depend completely on the bedrock connection of life to an animating, hidden, "wild" animality of desire: both prior to and beyond the human yet somehow still constituting that humanity as its secret essence.

In *History of Madness* Foucault charts a similar archaeological shift in the role and status of animals within European discourse on the mad. As he notes, from the beginning "it was probably essential for Western culture to link its perception of madness to imaginary forms of the relation between men and animals" (*HM* 151), and for a very long time in the West animals played the role of uncontrolled counter-humanity—that crazed, menacing opposite to human reason: "animals were more often thought of as being part of what might be termed a counter-nature, a negativity that menaced the order of things and constantly threatened the wisdom of nature with its wild frenzy" (*HM* 151). "In the classical age," Foucault concludes, "madness was still thought of as the counter-natural violence of the animal world" (*HM* 151). However, further into his *History of Madness* (foreshadowing the analysis in *The Order of Things*), Foucault will note a decisive series of breaks in the Western discourse of madness and animality, at precisely the Enlightenment moment when madness begins to get incorporated into the definition of reason (as a potential malady or even a secret romantic source of intellectual power, as opposed to the classical formation wherein madness functions as a merely negative counterpart to the discourse of reason): "From the moment when philosophy became anthropology [when thought became focused on human life], and men decided to find their place in the plenitude of the natural order, the animal lost that power of negativity, and assumed the positive form of an evolution between the determinism of nature and the reason of man" (*HM* 151).

As in *The Order of Things*, Foucault shows us in *History of Madness* that animality is not jettisoned at the birth of anthropological biopower (at least in part because such an abjected binary otherness was the role of animality in a prior, classical era); rather, "when philosophy became anthropology," the animal became incorporated into reason. Animality then becomes less a binary all-or-nothing function in relation to madness, operating instead on a sliding scale. With the anthropological turn to life the madman is recast: not as the subhuman animal other but as our less-fortunate sibling—beset not by the classical era's understanding of animality as the absence of rationality but by too much of a good thing: biopower’s embrace of life as animal desire.

Likewise, in *History of Madness* Foucault also calls our attention to the Aristotelian definitions of man (as rational and political animal) that will play a huge role in his thinking about biopower in the 1970s and 1980s:

Did the fact that, after Aristotle, men had spent two thousand years thinking of themselves as reasonable animals necessarily imply that they accepted the possibility that reason and animality were of a common order? Or that the definition of man as a "rational animal" provided a blueprint for understanding man's place in natural positivity? Independently of whatever Aristotle meant with that definition, it might be the case that for the Western world "rational animal" meant the manner in which the freedom of reason took off from a space of unchained reason and marked itself off from it, ultimately forming its opposite. (*HM* 151)

But as philosophy becomes anthropology at the birth of biopower in the early nineteenth century in Europe, Foucault argues that the classical age of the animal's binary alterity is also eclipsed: "At that point, the meaning of the term 'rational animal' underwent a radical change... From then on, madness had
to follow the determinism of a humanity perceived as natural in its own animality" (HM 151).

In *History of Madness* Foucault suggests we look to "the French poet Lautréamont" for "proof" of the "wild frenzy" (HM 151) that is life-as-animality; but consider, just as a passing example nearer to the present, Frank O’Hara’s 1950 poem "Animals":

Have you forgotten what we were like then
when we were still first rate
and the day came fat with an apple in its mouth
it’s no use worrying about Time
but we did have a few tricks up our sleeves
and turned some sharp corners
the whole pasture looked like our meal
we didn’t need speedometers
we could manage cocktails out of ice and water
I wouldn’t want to be faster
or greener than now if you were with me O you
were the best of all my days!45

Here in O’Hara’s poem, as Foucault suggests in the larger biopolitical realm of modernity, animals function less as our excluded "other" than as very intense markers for our hidden, better, or former—perhaps more authentic—selves. Our unconscious drives, O’Hara suggests, are animal in nature, and it is those unbridled desires that make us "first rate," most truly who we are. As O’Hara puts it, "the best of all my days" were animal in nature—when I didn’t worry about Time, traffic, or stocking the bar, and "the whole pasture looked like our meal." Here, animality is not demented or predatory (as Foucault suggests the classical age understood the mad, irrational "otherness" of animals) but takes the form of a biopolitical or "more gentle form of animality, which did not destroy its human truth in violence but allowed instead one of nature’s secrets to emerge: the rediscovery of the familiar but forgotten resemblance [of the mad person] with tame animals and children" (HM 435). I take this to resonate with O’Hara’s conclusion, where it is the precocious, desiring animal in us all who is addressed in the final lines: "O you / were the best of all my days."

In short, the archaeology of biopower that Foucault performs in *The Order of Things* and *History of Madness* shows decisively that the jettisoned, negative, or forgotten other of our biopolitical conception of life is most assuredly not the animal, insofar as animality is the subtending paradigm for our era of humanist, neoliberal biopower—where it’s all appetite and appropriation all the time.16 Tweaked and intensified a bit, Foucault’s archaeology of animality may compel us to ask whether contemporary animal studies, far from constituting a critique of an all-too-humanist biopower (exposing the imperialism of human life over animal life), tends to function in fact as an intense extension of that very biopower. A Foucauldian provocation might suggest that animals are important within contemporary academic discourse, or at least they’re more important than plants or other forms of life, not because animals function ethically as "wholly other" to humans but primarily because they’re "like us" in an originary way: they experience intense feelings; they are born and they die; they like to go walking in the park at sunset. Indeed, animals are wild, just like we are in our best and freest moments. As such, though, animals function less as our ethical "absolute other" than as our hidden, better self; our unconscious drives are animal in nature, and it is those unbridled desires that make us most truly who we are. Animals are more our life "companions" (to steal another phrase from Haraway) than our "others" (those figures excluded, forgotten, wholly unlike us but that we still depend on absolutely). Following Foucault’s reading, one might suggest that role of abjected other as having been played throughout the biopolitical era not by the animal but by the plant—which was indeed forgotten as the privileged form of life at the dawn of biopower. In this context it is probably worth recalling that the biomass of plant life on Earth’s terra firma does remain approximately one thousand times greater than the combined zoomass of all humans and other animals.17

And perhaps one related upshot of this genealogy, in terms of new directions in biopolitical ethics, might be an imperative to look at the strange and consistent elision of plants within the voluminous work on life within contemporary theory and philosophy—the primary project that will engage me in this book. There are, as we will see, myriad tantalizing places in Heidegger, Agamben, and Derrida (all of them re-reading Aristotle, especially from book 2 of *De anima*) where the proximity and difficulty posed by plant life is highlighted, only to be dropped quickly and consistently by all these thinkers in order to stay on the trail of the human/animal distinction. Indeed, if animal studies scholars can charge Foucault with "speciesism," then in turn Foucault’s archaeology of life (from the privileged plant form in an earlier era to the biopower’s fetishizing of the animal) might suggest that animal studies, in its foundational abjection
of plant life, is guilty of "kingdomism"—ignoring not just a species but an entire kingdom, which one would assume is a much greater crime on the "kingdom phylum-class" sliding scale of differentiation. Likewise, continuing research into plant behavior and intelligence confirms that plants are not, as was thought for centuries following Plato and Aristotle, sessile and insensate: recent research has uncovered that plants evidence active, purposeful, future-oriented movement and exhibit both competitive and defensive behavior. Plants, it seems, also have a certain kind of language—they share information concerning soil conditions and the presence of predators.\(^{18}\) Given this series of revelations, it becomes even harder to draw the lines among human, animal, and vegetable life. Indeed, some recent botanical research even bolsters Aristotle's twenty-four-hundred-year-old quip about feeling plants' pain: "A plant which is fixed in the ground does not like to be separated from it."\(^{19}\)

As I noted in my Preface, there are already several scholarly works out there that interrogate the question of vegetative life. Most of these books are notable, for my purposes here, not so much because they attempt to question the (animal) life-as-hidden-secret model that Foucault diagnoses for us but because they work very hard to extend that "hidden life" paradigm (and the anthropomorphic identity logic that rules over it) to plants as well.\(^{20}\) The "secret life of plants" has been a leitmotif from the dawn of interest in this topic in the 1970s, all the way to a 2013 symposium with that same title at Princeton.\(^{21}\) Mining this secretive nature, Marder suggests that "to get in touch with the existence of plants one must acquire a taste for the concealed and the withdrawn, including the various meanings of this existence that are equally elusive and inexhaustible." He continues: "If we are to 'think the plants,' we must not shy away from darkness and obscurity; and 'the generosity of vegetal soul is inexhaustible.'\(^{22}\) In short, a book like Marder's Plant-Thinking will argue at the end of the day that plants are the new animals (in the sense that Lauren Berlant conjures when she suggested that "affect is the new trauma").\(^{23}\) And there is likewise a robust emergent literature in both environmental studies and machine ethics, which suggests, if nothing else, that the question "What counts as an ethically compelling form of life?" is and will remain an open and hazardous one.

In any case, as Derrida persuasively insists in his work on animals, the primary stake of interrogating animality is not asking what we humans ethically need to "grant" to animals (personhood, thinking, recognition, a voice, a face, and so on), or to treat animals as identical to humans, but in asking whether humans can somehow separate themselves from (or elevate themselves above) their conception of "subhuman" others, like animals. (As we will see in the coming chapters, the Derridean project is undertaken not in the name of granting human privileges like rationality, communication, and agency to animals but in wondering whether humans have any less fettered access to those things than animals do.) And the conundrum would be ethically similar, it seems to me, for whatever we might have to say in the future about plants or other forms of biopolitical life: the project is less offering some of our human privilege to plants or machines or the earth itself (in short, anthropomorphizing them) than paying close attention to the power effects rendered by the myriad practices by which we do in fact differentiate ourselves from other forms of life, and what forms of violence those practices inevitably inflict.\(^{26}\) x

Foucault of course pursues ethical company with Derrida (and, I would suggest, with the founding principles of much animal studies) around the binary pathos of "totalization or nontotalization," which constitutes nearly the whole field of ethics in a deconstructive context: if totalization or the violent desire for completion can be disrupted, if an originary difference of undecidability can be mobilized and demonstrated, then some positive deconstructive work has been accomplished. However, such a supposedly ethical gesture toward the unfathomable or untotalizable other, as Foucault insists throughout his work, poses no essential question (ethical or otherwise) to the human sciences, because those contemporary sciences don't require or even desire totalization. As Foucault demonstrates in his work on the emergence of life in Europe, the Western human sciences need constantly to refashion an unfathomable depth, and inexhaustible other, so they can continue to do their work. The insistence on the primacy of some nontotalizable other doesn't cripple the human sciences but rather constitutes almost the entirety of their work: as Foucault concisely puts it, "an unveiling of the non-conscious is constitutive of all the sciences of man" (OT 364). (Economics, for example, doesn't know what value is any more than theology knows what God is or biology knows what life is—that's why you have robust discourses to study them.) So the trading-places game of ethical alterity—the nonhuman other is best figured as the unconscious, the animal, the plant, the earth, the robot, and so forth—tends primarily to extend and deepen the constitutive work of the human sciences (the production of undecidability, which in turn produces more commentary), rather than to disrupt that work in some essential way.

In fact, barely a page of Foucault's methodological treatise The Archaeology of Knowledge goes by without some kind of stinging critique of any and all discourses of absent origin, hidden depth, or undecidability. As Foucault
clearly writes, what he seeks in archaeology is "not a condition of possibility but a law of coexistence": discourse is constituted by "something more than a series of traces" of lost origins, and he insists that the statements forming and transforming the archive are "not defined by their truth—that is, not gauged by the presence of a secret content." 24 In his most pointed criticism of Derrida in the *Archaeology*, Foucault questions the manner in which discourse "can be purified in the problematic of trace, which, prior to all speech, is the opening of inscription, the gap of deferred time [écart du temps différé]: it is always the historico-transcendental theme that is reinvested" (AK 121). And, mirroring language that he uses to criticize Derrida's reading of *History of Madness*,

Foucault lays waste to any discourse, scientific or philosophical, "which finds, beneath events, another, more serious, more sober, more secret, more fundamental history, closer to the origin, more firmly linked to its ultimate horizon (and consequently more in control of all its determinations)" (AK 121). In the end, for Foucault one might say that deconstruction is merely a marker and bearer of the "nontotalizing" symptoms of biopower and the human sciences, rather than forwarding any kind of corrective to these formations.

**Foucault and Agamben Redux: Animality and Biopower**

I think one can see more clearly Foucault's difficulties with the whole transcendental discourse of totalization and hidden connection by looking at Giorgio Agamben's reading of him. Agamben (in)famously outlines his project in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* like this: "the Foucauldian thesis [on biopower] will . . . have to be corrected or, at least, completed." 25 Agamben gives Foucault credit for calling our attention to something like the move I have just highlighted in Foucault's work, the biopolitical subsumption of life's animality (Agamben's zoe) within the realm of social power (bios): "In the last years of his life . . . Michel Foucault began to direct his inquiries with increasing insistence toward the study of what he defined as biopolitics, that is, the growing inclusion of man's natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power" (HS 19). And certainly Agamben's work on the "exception" follows a logic somewhat similar to Foucault's on the "norm": alterity is incorporated precisely by being designated as other; the abnormal exception reinforces the power of the norm. However, Agamben's completion of Foucault functions not through a series of minor corrections but rather through a wholesale rejection of Foucault's privileged biopolitical sites of historical analysis—sexuality, market economics, or the fashioning of the self—in favor of an emphasis on Nazi concentration camps as the "exemplary places of modern biopolitics" (HS 19); as we will see, that change of diagnostic venue makes all the difference when it comes to thinking life and animality.

As Agamben insists, "today [in 1995] it is not the city but rather the [concentration] camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (HS 181), by which he primarily means to signal the continued primacy of sovereignty as the contemporary mode of political power, specifically in the form of the sovereign exception: who lives and who dies; those granted inclusion and the life of citizenship versus those who are "othered" and reduced to bare life. "At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested" (HS 9). In a move quite familiar to us from deconstruction, Agamben shows us how the abjecting of the "other" (homo sacer) is in fact the condition of possibility for the configuration of "the same" (the citizen). The very biopolitical exclusion of zoe (bare life) allows bios (political life) to emerge; zoe is thereby incorporated into bios as that which is excluded but can never be acknowledged as such, the exception that proves the sovereign rule.

While Agamben consistently acknowledges his debts to Foucault in all this (as he says, "I first began to understand the figure of the *Homo sacer* after I read Foucault's texts on biopolitics"), 26 there seems a long line indeed of things that Agamben means to "correct" in Foucault. As Derrida scathingly puts it in his treatment of Agamben, "poor Foucault—he never had such a cruel admirer." 27 So what exactly is it that's being "corrected or, at least, completed" by Agamben? It seems to me that the stake is nothing less than Foucault's entire analysis of power. Recall first the Foucauldian axiom that each historical mode of Western power dominant since the sovereign era of the early modern monarchs (the disciplinary regimes that first arose in the eighteenth century and the biopower born in the nineteenth) has not primarily been characterized by a top-down state apparatus (much less by the sovereign decisions of particular individuals) but works at more mundane "retail" levels. Foucault consistently emphasizes the ways in which power over the past several hundred years has become "intensified"—dispersed and saturated within institutions (discipline) and even into the everyday work of subject formation itself—in practices like sexuality or the neoliberal emphasis on an individual consuming market goods and services (under the dispositif of biopower).
In Foucault's account Western "power" has not operated primarily in a "sovereign" manner (centralized in a very small set of totalitarian decision makers bent on pure domination) since the seventeenth century—which is not to say that sovereign power has disappeared altogether but that it is no longer the primary mode through which other modes must make their way. Sovereign power still exists under disciplinary and biopolitical regimes, but to do its work, even this top-down brand of sovereign power needs to pursue its aims through other-than-sovereign means—through institutional channels (for discipline) or subjective ones (biopower). Most important, the rise of capitalism (and thereby the dismantling of state-based sovereignty) figures prominently in Foucault's account of biopower's intensification; and in this Foucault's analysis is akin to Marx's, where the "real subsumption" of capital is impossible until capitalism morphs from being a kind of external shell containing the socius (merely "formal subsumption") to a state where capitalism becomes completely woven into the fabric of everyday life. 

For Agamben, on the contrary, it is not decentralized capitalist practice but the sovereign state of exception—a centralized, top-down decision concerning who lives and who dies—that, far from constituting an archaic mode or understanding of power, remains the essence or hidden animating secret of power in the West, and to this day it constitutes the basis for all political power. In short, Agamben nothing short of what he names "totalitarianism"—the idealist project of wholly eradicating difference and resistance—is the political project characteristic of power in what he calls "our age." In correcting Hannah Arendt's notion of power along the path of tidying up Foucault's mistakes, Agamben writes that "the radical transformation of politics into the realm of bare life (that is, into the camp) legitimated and necessitated total domination" (HS 120): "the [concentration] camp—as the pure, absolute, and impassible biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception)—will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity" (HS 123). For Agamben the machine that animates all the others today is neither a disciplinary institution nor a sexual identity but a Nazi concentration camp—a "pure, absolute and impassible biopolitical space" dedicated to "total domination." Right now, update your Facebook status to "totally dominated."

Of course, it's precisely this melodramatic strain that makes Agamben so seductive for many readers, but from a Foucauldian point of view it seems a serious diagnostic mistake to suggest that the biopower characteristic of global neoliberal capitalism does its work or achieves its effects in the same way as the state-based fascist biopower of the early to mid-twentieth century did. Aside from a very loose metaphorics, I see no convincing way that the "dream structures" of post-postmodern capitalism (the online auction or dating site, the shopping mall, or the stock market) are "fascist" or "totalitarian" in the same way that a concentration camp was, and insisting on such a homology seems to offer very few tools for understanding, much less resisting, the supple biopower of our own day. Capital requires us all to circulate, as much and as widely as possible—looking for work, bargains, love, information, Internet porn, recipes, entertainment, new experiences, whatever. Inversely, the concentration camp exists primarily to curtail all movement; it's a machine designed to confine and warehouse human subjects until it's time to slaughter them. Why contemporary consumption capitalism wants to confine and then slaughter its primary drivers (consumers) is never quite made clear in Agamben. In any case there would seem to be important differences between the Luftwaffe and DirectTV, though both can overwhelm you, unseen from the air. At the very least it would seem that the parallels among market economics, culture-industry manipulation, and the techniques of fascism that Adorno identified in the mid-twentieth century would have to be updated considerably rather than simply imported wholesale into our present.

As I've pointed out elsewhere, the suturing of contemporary subjectivity and quotidian life to the regime of biopower (which is at work everywhere, from sexuality through neoliberal consumerism to the everyday work of each person's identity formation) constitutes for Foucault a "postulate of absolute optimism" (as opposed to the unrelentingly tragic pathos of Agamben's work on the regime of biopolitics). It's axiomatic for Foucault that where there is power, there is resistance; so as biopower saturates every corner of our daily lives, so do the experimental practices of resistance: more saturation of power also means more sites of resistance. As our everyday lives become increasingly targeted by biopower, so do our everyday practices themselves become sites of increasingly intense resistance. Foucault's work demonstrates time and again that power does not primarily dominate or repress in some totalitarian fashion; in fact, Foucault famously argues that almost all political theory has yet to cut off the king's head—which is to say, political theory remains ineffectual because of its outmoded understanding of how power works. He writes quite straightforwardly: "What we need . . . is a political philosophy that isn't erected around the problem of sovereignty." In short, Foucault's provocation concerning power is simply this: we are freer than we think we are.
For Agamben nothing could be farther from the case: as he argues, the "increasing inscription of individuals' lives within the state order" of biopolitics inexorably leads to "a new and dreadful foundation for the very sovereign power from which they wanted to liberate themselves" (HS 121). In Agamben contemporary biopower is and remains sovereign in practice and theory. So the whole of Agamben's project, one might say, consists of stitching the king's head back on, recentering and hierarchizing power—thereby eschewing virtually the entirety of Foucault's work on biopower, not to mention his analysis of the disciplinary regimes, in favor of what in Foucault remains a seventeenth-century conception of power. Odder still is the historical fact that Agamben's work in this area has taken place during an unprecedented period of neoliberal privatization of social power, since the 1990s. Entire populations today undoubtedly continue to find themselves newly categorized as expendable "bare life"; however, the practices responsible for that categorization are increasingly implemented not by jackbooted state thugs who round up and confine populations at state-run facilities but by neoliberal market-makers in designer suits (who, make no mistake, have access to thugs should it come to that; but the thugs aren't the cutting financial edge of the operation: not efficient, too expensive).

Corporate risk assessment teams and credit rating agencies redline existing neighborhoods (or even entire countries, as Greece or Ireland could attest after the 2008 worldwide crash); and concomitant "austerity" measures mean less access to jobs, affordable food, and health care. But such measures are dictated and brought about primarily through market mechanisms; and while large-scale austerity plans continue to be installed through sovereign dictates of the nation-state—protecting the currency and servicing debts before citizens, which means slashing social benefits—those interventions are largely undertaken today in the name (which is to say, within the practice and theory) of the market, not in the name of the Volk, the Supreme Leader, or the king. There are of course no legal barriers against a corporation opening a discount supermarket or a health-care facility in a "high-risk" neighborhood, but there are no market "incentives" to do so either; and these biopolitical disincentives function more effectively than the former state-based modes of discrimination. (Racial desegregation, women's or ethnic minority rights, equal access laws concerning physical disability or sexual orientation: these are all protected by the law, but continue to be exercised—or not—largely by the market.) But of course the punch line, then, is that, given this state of affairs, the dictates of the market are anything but states of exception; they are the (ubiquitous) rule. Or, more accurately, market mantras like flexibility and resilience are themselves made into rules, ones that extend everywhere (the family, the school, the hospital, and so on). Indeed, neoliberalism's stated desire to make government "small enough to drown in the bathtub" (in Grover Norquist's pithy formulation) ensures that even if any given state's interests in socialism somehow should rekindle, there will be little or no tax revenue to support such ventures. In any case this unprecedented global rise of neoliberal, antigovernment sentiment and practice over the past several decades seems at considerable odds with Agamben's portrait of state power's near-iron centralization "today." The concentration camp, whatever else one might say about its unspeakable horrors, was most certainly not driven by the dictates of today's cowboy-capitalist, "small government" neoliberalism.33

As Foucault famously puts it, today's dispositif of biopower works by "making live and letting die," as opposed to sovereignty's rounding up the usual suspects and killing them (or not)—"making die and letting live." And this is not, as Agamben would have it, simply an update of sovereign power's relation to "life" but a wholesale transmutation of it: Foucault's biopower works directly on life, from the very beginning (birth rates, demographics, infant health, immunizations), in contrast to sovereign power, which is only really interested in most people's everyday life in a negative or external way (extensive actuarial knowledge concerning the everyday sex lives and health records of peasants is inconsequential to the early modern sovereign but have become key to the constant risk assessments of neoliberal capitalism). As Gilles Deleuze argues in his essay periodizing Foucault's work (from discipline to biopower), "a man is no longer a man confined but a man in debt"34—which is maybe to say that we are "made to live" in a biopolitical register primarily by being encouraged to consume (follow our desires), sometimes far beyond our means.

In Agamben's work, however, contemporary biopolitical questions of debt, surveillance, or the increasing saturation of the culture industries (questions concerning a control that steps in to intensify the disciplinary mechanisms of the panopticon) are finally just more evidence of totalitarian sovereignty, bent on reducing us to bare life through the sovereign exception. Agamben sums things up in "No to Biopolitical Tattooing," his 2004 explanation of why he would not submit to post-9/11 US customs fingerprinting:

The problem exceeds the limits of personal sensitivity and simply concerns the juridical-political status (it would be simpler, perhaps, to say "bio-political") of citizens of the so-called democratic states where we live. There has been an attempt the last few years to convince us to accept as the humane and normal dimensions
of our existence, practices of control that had always been properly considered inhumane and exceptional. Thus, no one is unaware that the control exercised by the state through the usage of electronic devices, such as credit cards or cell phones, has reached previously unimaginable levels. All the same, it wouldn’t be possible to cross certain thresholds in the control and manipulation of bodies without entering a new bio-political era, without going one step further in what Michel Foucault called the progressive animalization of man which is established through the most sophisticated techniques.35

This sense of “progressive animalization of man which is established through the most sophisticated techniques” is probably the most concise version of what Agamben wants from Foucault, or what attracts him initially to what he sees as Foucault’s analysis of biopower: quite simply, the more bios we endure (the more our lives are subject to increasingly sophisticated political media and demographic techniques for working on individuals), the more animalized and expendable we become (the more we are reduced to the bare, bestial life of zoe).

Indeed, if we examine Agamben’s earlier deployment of this Foucauldian turn of phrase concerning biopower and “animalization” in the opening pages of Homo Sacer, it’s clear that Agamben wants from Foucault the outlines of a tragic modernist logic—where progress leads inexorably to barbarism, refining life means eliminating life, bios becomes indistinguishable from zoe, human life is reduced to animality. In a kind of “pure gold” moment for Agamben this Foucauldian sentiment concerning the “animalization of man” is followed directly by one of Foucault’s very rare mentions of the Holocaust (in some remarks after a paper given at Stanford in 1979). Very early on in Homo Sacer, Agamben outlines and bootstraps his project by quoting from Foucault:

After 1977, the courses at Collège de France start to focus on the passage from the “territorial State” to the “State of population” and on the resulting increase in importance of the nation’s health and biological life as a problem of sovereign power, which is then gradually transformed into a “government of men.” [Here Agamben cites Foucault’s collected Dits et écrits 3:719, where this quotation does live: the following one does not.] “What follows is a kind of bestialization of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques. For the first time in history, the possibilities of the social sciences are made known, and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust.” (HS 3)36

The logic that Agamben wants to harvest from Foucault could not be clearer: the ascent of biopower—the increasing “government of men” and their biologi-
cal lives—results directly in mass slaughter: the political project of protecting and managing a healthy life (bios) for the citizenry simultaneously makes it necessary to exclude and eliminate other, inferior or dangerous forms of life (zoe). Biopower is the operating system of totalitarianism, and modern power is in its nature sovereign, with its primary tool kit being the permanent state of exception (the decision concerning who lives, who dies) and the constant related threat of being reduced to bare, animal life. In short, Agamben extracts from Foucault a biopolitical logic whereby the human sciences (the study and maintenance of life) and the Holocaust (life’s obliteration before power) constitute a Mobius strip of political rule. To “protect life” is in the end also and necessarily “to authorize a holocaust”; our haughty “sophisticated political techniques” (bios) in the end only reduce us to beasts (zoe), to be controlled by our handlers until they decide to slaughter us like so many cattle.

All this is fine and good, the sort of tragic fare that makes Agamben such an appealing reading for academic liberals—good news for people who like bad news. But as I’ve been suggesting, whatever you may think of Agamben’s diagnosis of the contemporary (and it should be clear that I’m not persuaded), you simply can’t get there from Foucault. And there are really no reasons why you’d want to, insofar as the Foucauldian biopolitical world of bodies, pleasures, and a thousand microresistances are of little to no use in a totalitarian society modeled on the concentration camp, where you are forced to obey or be obliterated. If you’re reduced to animality by power, your resistances can’t really count for much, or any more than the steer’s thrashing moments of protest before its death constitute any meaningful resistance to sovereign power of the slaughterhouse.

Strictly speaking, however, the horrific human-slaughterhouse situation of a concentration camp is not a Foucauldian “power” relationship at all, simply because in Foucault a power relation implies resistance, which is by definition absent in the situation of “bare life” or pure domination. If Agamben is right—if power today remains sovereign in its nature and practice—then Foucault’s work on biopower and the increasing ubiquity of resistance becomes completely moot. This is precisely why Agamben has so little use for Foucault’s everyday sites of analysis: “Like the concepts of sex and sexuality, the concept of the ‘body’ too is always already caught in a deployment of power. The ‘body’ is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it or in the economy of its pleasures seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power” (HS 187). If we are all akin to Damiani, the tortured, animalized regicide who endures the intensity of sovereign power in the
the first birth of biopower

horrific opening pages of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, then I think we'd have to agree that Agamben is right: our sexuality or our everyday responses to the practices of power do indeed remain completely unhelpful when it comes to mobilizing resistance. Any more than a barnyard rooster's courting of a hen, it's hard to imagine Damien's sexuality or other of his microlevel practices of everyday resistance having put up any bulwark at all against his reduction to a pure surface of bare life, to be eliminated (or not) by sovereign power. If we are all Damienises—reduced to animality (made to die or let live) by our sovereign masters—perhaps our only solace for the future is that "We'll Make Great Pets," as Perry Farrell has ironically encapsulated the fate of the human.

To put it another way, if the "progress" of the human sciences has an obvious relation to the "animalization" of "man," I've tried to show in what sense this functions in Foucault: biopower "animalizes" not through a chiasmic reversal or "reduction" of the human to its supposed other, "bare" "animal" life (through Agamben's biopolitical tattooing). Rather, biopower "animalizes" in Foucault through a subtending incorporation of an understanding of "life" primarily as desire (from the representational era's picture of life as a kind of sessile plant, to the roaming, restless animal who becomes the incorporated figure for biopower). Insofar as the human animal is understood in terms of its desires under the regime of biopower, it certainly follows for Foucault that those desires can be worked on by sophisticated political techniques—indeed, compared to the relatively crude techniques of sovereign power (torture and public execution), biopower needs to build on disciplinary exercises by inventing ever-more supple techniques. Insofar as nonsovereign power acts on actions (rather than on bodies or minds), it must become "light" enough to regulate virtual states of practice. The sophistication of biopolitical techniques, in other words, is not for Foucault primarily to be found in their brutal totalization or totalitarian intentions (power's hidden desire to reduce us all to beasts, leashed and branded by power) but in those techniques' lightness, their increasing saturation within the social and their heightened economic effectiveness, what I've elsewhere highlighted as Foucauldian power's "intensity."²⁷

When Foucault insists that there's an "animalization of man" involved in biopower's birth and functioning, he means it quite literally: we have incorporated the beast into the contemporary biopolitical definition of "man" as endless, unthematizable animal desire, with the practices of sexuality and neoliberal capitalism its two most intense markers. Perhaps this explains why Foucault good-naturedly tells Deleuze, "I cannot bear the word desire,"²⁴ because for Foucault the theme of desire quite literally continues to play out as a torted dialectical drama born at the dawn of the nineteenth century: animal desires endlessly frustrated by the constraints of civilization.

For Agamben, however, bestialization constitutes less a contemporary practice or a historical phenomenon than a transhistorical metaphor or simile for the human condition, as is (despite his protests to the contrary) his emphasis on the concentration camp or sovereign power. Contemporary society is like a concentration camp or like an absolute monarchy; we are treated like animals when we have to surrender our DNA or fingerprints. But if animal studies has taught us nothing else, its emphasis on the material facts of the food industry should make us suspicious of metaphors suggesting that humans are treated as animals by advanced capitalism: recall that more than fifty billion chickens are slaughtered each year globally (more than nine billion in the United States alone), the vast majority living their short, genetically engineered lives in a cage that's too small for them to stand up or turn around in, many subsisting on feed made from the ground-up corpses of their deceased brethren, too unfit for sale. As utterly terrible as global poverty is to endure for half the human population on this planet, most people are not in fact treated like animals—slaughtered by the billions in what is indeed a sovereign manner, with little or no afterthought.

Indeed, as Foucault puts it in his formula for biopower, today's global poor are made to live, or left to die—an important difference from the sovereign, concentration-camp edicts of making die, or letting live (which most animals presently endure: the feed animals are made to die, while the dwindling populations of "wild" animals are merely left to live). Of course, ethnic cleansing, torture, and mass slaughter of humans (Foucault's sovereign "making die") still does happen in our world, but those sovereign practices are hardly the primary modality of power's functioning today (small solace, however, if you happen to be subject to these horrific practices). Or at least this is Foucault's bedrock argument about power's mutations in the West, pivoting over the last four hundred years from the sovereign execution of Damiens to a focus on the biopolitical intricacies of our identity, health, sexuality, or consumer desires.

And this diagnostic difference between sovereignty and biopower is crucial at least partially because sovereign power, while notoriously difficult (if not impossible) to resist, tends to be relatively easy to spot, diagnose, and denounce: in short, someone else is always wielding "sovereign power." Even so, the biopolitics of "making live and letting die" is a regime in which all of us are implicated: who gets antiretroviral drugs, and who doesn't? Are the
rich countries willing to pay more taxes, or endure weaker corporate profits, so that millions of poor people in remote regions can live? Are such policy matters reducible to a model of sovereign “decision”? The dictates of biopower implicate us all in the global dramas of life and death (it's a neoliberal market question all the way down), in a way that the bare life/sovereign power drama doesn't. As Tim Dean puts it:

In his attempt to revise Foucault, Agamben instead reverts to a pre-Foucauldian model that treats power relations as polarized between those who have all the power (the position of sovereignty) and those who have none (the position of homo sacer). . . . I suspect that the appeal of Agamben's account, while ostensibly attributable to its utility in describing our post-9/11 political landscape, lies more fundamentally in its reassurance that we know where the power is because it has been so starkly consolidated. Homo Sacer permits us once more to believe in, and perhaps identify with, the reassuring idea of wholly innocent victims, those who have been divested utterly of power.59

In short, Agamben's tragic thematization of the world is utterly irreconcilable with Foucault's, precisely around the central Foucauldian question of what power is and how it operates. For Foucault, biopower does not primarily function in a "sovereign" manner, and to suggest that it does violates the cardinal, organizing rule that is consistently repeated throughout his work—the simple reason that power is neither good nor bad but dangerous. It's not held by some and withheld from others, but it circulates through a socius. For Agamben, however, political power today remains sovereign (it either takes life or simply lets live, even in its most "sophisticated" forms), and thereby power, as Dean insists in his account of Agamben, is understood as being very bad indeed.

Zoe and/as Vegetable Life?

This largely metaphorical drama of sovereign power versus bare life helps us to understand why, in The Open: Man and Animal, Agamben can argue not only that the animal is a figure for mere or natural life (zoe) but, indeed, that vegetable life is or can be one of its primary figures. For example, Agamben somewhat puzzlingly writes on the heels of his analysis of Bichat:

As Foucault has shown, when the modern State, starting in the seventeenth century, began to include the care of the population's life as one of its essential tasks, thus transforming its politics into biopolitics, it was primarily a means of a pro-

gressive generalization and redefinition of the concept of vegetative life (now coinciding with the biological heritage of the nation) that the State would carry out its new vocation. And still today, in discussions about the definition ex lege of the criteria for clinical death, it is a further identification of this bare life—detached from any brain activity and, so to speak, from any subject—which decides whether a certain body can be considered alive or must be abandoned to the extreme vicissitude of transplantation.60

Here Agamben startlingly suggests that his notion of bare life is in fact best understood not as "wild" animal life but as vegetable life, the lowest form of the living within Aristotle's tripartite vegetable-animal-human work on the psukhe (which we will examine in Chapter 2). Even more puzzling here is the claim that Foucault grounds his analysis of state racism ("the biological heritage of the nation") in "the concept of vegetative life." That's an interesting claim, one that I'd like to hear more about.

Rather than further develop these startling claims, however, Agamben immediately backs off this tangent about vegetable life as bare life (this in fact will be the last mention of vegetable life in the entire book), returning to the familiar ground of bios, the political life of humans, and zoe as the animal "besocialization" of that life:

The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all as a mobile border within living man, and without this intimate caesar a the very decision of what is human and what is not would probably not be possible. It is possible to oppose man to other living things, and at the same time to organize the complex—and not always edifying—economy of relations between men and animals, only because something like animal life has been separated within man, only because his distance and proximity to the animal have been recognized first of all in the closest and most intimate place.61

So from the bare life of vegetality, seemingly the threshold between life and nonlife (from Aristotle forward, it's held that plants are "alive" in a way that rocks are not), we withdraw somehow to an even more originary threshold between man and animal—suggesting that for Agamben, Aristotle's tripartite soul (vegetable-animal-human) grows not from the ground up but from the top down. This is, I think, only to emphasize the obvious: that everything in Agamben goes through the bios/zoe distinction, with animality constituting the transhistorical other (the first sovereign exclusion) that haunts and disrupts all "civilized" or cultured human life. In short, the zoe of animality becomes
of slaughtered innocents. The bios/zoe drama is the drama of civilization and its discontents: death as edifying, sacred sacrifice (the “good” or “noble” version of our humanity as animality) versus death as mere cessation of life (“bad” or “ignoble” animality), but either way it’s death nonetheless.

Likewise, Agamben’s flirtation with and rejection of vegetable life as a template for zoe suggests yet another way in which the seeming centrality of the human/animal opposition harbors a whole series of hidden costs: here the primary difficulty is the way that Agamben figures the political power of bios (metaphorically the human) as purely abjecting the wild life of zoe (metaphorically, the animal). In the end this “animal” way of thinking power and life reinforces, rather than questioning, a whole series of political, theoretical, and cultural formations that are the basis for the nineteenth-century birth of biopower in Europe. The whole category of agency-as-choice, for example, is absolutely key to Agamben (the sovereign decision), as well as to animal studies: animals are ethically compelling primarily insofar as we can choose to treat them better, not to eat or slaughter them, offer them rights or protections, etc. But if plants become recognized as an ethically compelling figure for life, the whole question of sovereign human agency gets complicated substantially. In short, what’s left for us to choose if we decide no longer to kill plants in order for humans to survive? To paraphrase Nietzsche, what’s left for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent, if the salad bar can no longer function as an ethical refuge from the rest of the menu at the steakhouse?

Also problematic is the fact that animal-human analogies to individual consciousness, suffering, vision, desire, and communication tend to focus all discussion on individual living beings as the only biopolitically compelling entities, the only life forms worth the name. Life that is housed in an individual being, with a rough approximation to the organism of the human (most obviously, the animal), has become the primary marker for the “other” in our biopolitical era. However, it seems more likely that individuated beings like animals are not in fact the human’s most distant other but rather the closest approximation (and in fact, as Foucault shows, the subtextual scaffolding of biopower’s Homo economicus. As we’ll see in the following chapters on Derrida and Heidegger, the theoretical debate over animal lives and worlds remains a keen one. But the question of plants, whether they have lives or worlds at all, presents a series of even more interesting and difficult questions.