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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Technocratic Reason in the Government of Emergency. A Theoretical Analysis on the Management of the Covid-19 Epidemic

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ABSTRACT: The assumption on which this contribution is based is that in liberal democracies the "political space" represents the confrontational space of coexistence in which lives are governed by the "legitimate" power of politics. What we have observed over the course of about two years now is that the epidemic must be understood within this space and, as happens for the observation of all "social facts", it cannot be considered as an isolated phenomenon. The history of epidemics is therefore mainly a "social and political history"; just think of the way in which the use of measures to counter the contagion redesigns the meaning of coexistence and power relations. The Covid-19 epidemic comes at the end of an economic crisis that began in 2008 and should not be disconnected from this, despite the tendency in public opinion and the media to consider it an "external factor", exclusively a health issue relating above all to "vital processes". Therefore, this contribution intends to propose an examination of the "government of the emergency" in liberal, capitalist, de-collectivized societies through a theoretical approach (biopolitical and dialectical) which, on the one hand, investigates the relationship between government, power and contagion control devices and, on the other hand, explores the presuppositions of the crisis of knowledge that increasingly gives way to "technique" which becomes an administrative tool.

KEYWORDS: Liberal democracy, health government, biopolitics, technocracy, dialectical thought

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has called into question many of the assumptions on which liberal democracies were based. This took place in the midst of a structural change that has been going on for some time that has affected policies, mechanisms of government and, consequently, the forms of coexistence. This type of change has already been felt since the end of the 1970s with the crisis of the universal welfare model, of Fordism, of

the wage-earning society (Castel 1995; 2003) and, consequently, with the redefinition of the "employment" statute in late capitalist societies. From this point of view, if the "welfare" model represented, through conflict, the realization, albeit partial, of the construction process of what Robert Castel calls "social property" (Castel 2003) – the "property rights" – conversely, its gradual decline has shifted the burden of "possibility" onto the individual and his responsibility. In long term these changes have inevitably led to rethinking some central issues in democracies, such as citizenship which, as Etienne Balibar (2015) writes, is not eternal. Looking at history from a dialectical perspective, Balibar argues that citizenship is the product of a «[…] historical process governed by a law of reproduction, interruption and permanent transformation» (2015, pp. 36-37) whose fragility is caused by the tension between constituent and legitimate power and political movements that intend to extend and broaden rights. Beyond the legal sphere, we can say that the concept of citizenship in liberal democracies is not an absolute; on the contrary democracies that try to "preserve" a monolithic idea of citizenship – as evidenced in Balibar's reflection – hinder their same democratization process. In this sense, citizenship is the product of a continuous oscillation between destruction and reconstruction that the institutions of the *polis* themselves reproduce. By this we mean a redefinition of everything concerning the dimension of the *polis*, that is the sphere of power that belongs both to the State and to civil society and which shapes the political community. In Italy, during the Covid epidemic, citizenship has been called into question by the introduction of vaccination pass (green pass); the latter was the product of merely technical policies[1] which, through the recognition of moral conduct, granted and at the same time subtracted rights; one may belong to the *polis* but not be recognized as such to access rewards and possibilities that would normally be guaranteed. This is an aspect that must be understood within the political space of the democratic and liberal State. Marx provides (1976) a first critical reflection on the relationship between citizenship, belonging and rights; the citizen, he wrote, is not really a subject of law belonging to the political community if he is not a "bourgeois citizen". For Marx the declaration of human and citizen rights following the French Revolution, from which still result today's values of freedom and equality, actually concerned the bourgeoisie and certainly not all citizens. "Humans and citizens" were members of the bourgeois classes and what made life dignified and therefore free was private property, property of both goods and of one's own person[2]. How could all citizens be free, and therefore protected, guaranteed and "recognized" if they did not have property? The poor and the proletarians in fact were not free, or at least they were not "considered" as such. Even if it's in the State that "human becomes political", citizenship becomes an exclusive condition for Marx. Indeed, Marx believes that, in order to assert itself politically, the bourgeois society needs sovereignty, which in fact it considers "its" sovereignty, as a guarantee of its property and its freedom. The concept of State sovereignty in Marx is therefore in complete contradiction with that of Hegel (Marx 1976). If for Hegel sovereignty was the prerequisite of the modern and constitutional State in which it cancels the "individualistic" impulses – an idea of sovereignty very close to what we have today – for Marx the sovereignty of the State represents the reproduction of unresolved power relations. Therefore, in the Marxian perspective, the sovereignty of the State exists because social classes have not resolved the conflict and delegate the responsibility for resolving class antagonism to the subject that holds the supreme power, the sovereign State. In clear opposition to the Marxian reading of the State is evidently the conception of State of the theorists of liberalism in which, as Michel Foucault points out, the goal is the production and granting of freedom, in the always tense and problematic relationship between the individual and the collectivity.

[1] The overlap between political power and "technical-scientific logic" quickly becomes evident in Italy. Since the first phase of the epidemic spread, the "political" government led by Giuseppe Conte relies on managers and technicians to deal with the crisis. First, on January 31st, with the decree of state emergency, the Prime Minister appoints Civil Protection Department Chief Angelo Borrelli as Special Commissioner for the Covid-19 emergency; in March 2020, with a Prime Minister's decree (DPCM), he appoints, as "extraordinary commissioner", Domenico Arcuri, managing director of Invitalia, National Investment Agency; on April 10th, with a DPCM, the Prime Minister appoints a task force led by the manager and former CEO of the Vodafone Group, Vittorio Colao. For a detailed report on the subject see (Rullo 2021).
[2] In this regard, see Ernst Bloch's reading of Marx's work (1968)

In the midst of the Covid pandemic, in Italy, but in different forms also in other countries in Europe (Braun 2021), the resolution of the internal crisis took place through a technocratic political logic. During the second Giuseppe Conte government (September 2019-February 2021), emergency measures were introduced through the well-known Prime Ministerial Decree[3] – therefore the executive branch go beyond the legislative (Carrer 2021) – which are based on quantitative data emerging from curves, statistics and projections. However, it is with the government led by Mario Draghi (February 2021-October 2022) that the focus is on the expertise of the technicians. The technical government led by Draghi, described as a government of national unity and with no political connotation, does not in itself represent a singularity – this had already happened with the Mario Monti government during the years following the 2007 crisis – rather it confirms the idea that liberal democracies need to support themselves on an "administrative rationality", technocracy, founded on the competence of a few who possess the necessary skills (Centeno 1993). The technocratic governance of neo-liberal capitalism is a response to the problems of governability, also linked to financial stability, which have led to the delegation of ever greater powers to independent technocratic agencies; first of all central banks (Braun 2021, pp. 107-108). The government led by Mario Draghi, not surprisingly a former governor of the European Central Bank, is called to resolve the pandemic and economic emergency in place of a political government.

To understand the mechanism that makes technocracy a founding element of liberal and capitalist democracies, this paper intends to examine the "emergency government" in the midst of the Covid-19 epidemic, with mentions to the Italian case, through a theoretical approach that takes into account the implications that have affected and still affect the crisis from a political and historical point of view. The contribution is structured as follows: in the first section we will discuss about the concepts of contagion and immunity in liberal democracies from a political point of view; in the second section we will focus on moral and police policies in health governance from a historical perspective; in the third section we will deal about biopolitical de-politicization; in the fourth section will deal with technical rationality as an instrument of politics. The contribution ends with a reflection on dialectical thought and its possible use to understand the symbolic order and conflict that underlies the social bond during crisis.

2. The liberal policies of contagion

There is no disease that does not involve a being in its entirety wrote Jacques Le Goff (2003) about leprosy in the Middle Ages. This also applies to the spread of Covid-19. The epidemic involves the individual and society as a whole and is therefore a "social question". Work, the economy, public health as well as "forms of social relations" acquire a different meaning. Distance (social or physical?), responsibility (individual or collective?), sense of protection (of oneself or of the community?) are issues that have always concerned the nature of the modern State, from the philosophical-political reflections of contractualists such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes to the theorists of neoliberalism. But the history of epidemics is also a "political history" because the use of measures to prevent contagion reflects on the social morphology by redesigning the political space, the space of coexistence in which citizens recognize themselves as "belonging" to the *civitas* and in which they are governed by the "legitimate" power of the State. In the "society of individuals" of liberal democracies, contagion thus becomes a representation of the dissolution of the socio-political order in which, to use the epidemiological metaphor, the agent that causes the infection and the host merge. The contagion

[3]An analysis of the content of the various Prime Ministerial Decree can be found in Pellizzoni and Sena (2021), who distinguish four stages in the management phase of the Conte II government. The authors' thesis is that the government's logic was based on precaution rather than prevention, mediating between the disciplinary model and the safety-oriented one, but with never really positive effects.

isolates everyone by reproducing the social organization of a society which is in itself de-collectivized by the crisis of generalized protections (Castel 2003). Contagion then becomes a political metaphor; it acts by contact but distances and divides. Policies that attempt to mitigate their effects are also policies of separation that project measures for "coexistence at a distance" into social organization. Even herd immunity, which in epidemiological language describes the possibility of a social group to protect itself (through the vaccine or through the immune system that adapts to pathogens), is a concept that involves mechanisms for identifying differences. It is necessary to isolate some elements and make sure that they are assimilated to the flock and do not "become" anomalies. Immunity is the "other" dimension of the infection. Both work through classification and separation. Immunity has the function of saving life – the "immune paradigm" as a necessity of the modern individual (Esposito 2011; 2022) – but at the same time it describes the state of isolation and therefore of defense against external attacks which is achieved not with cohesion but with distance. The Latin word *immunitas*, philosopher Roberto Esposito tells us, is a privative word, the meaning of which derives from what denies the *munus* (duty). Therefore it has an antisocial character. The *immunitas* interrupts the forms of cooperation that are typical of the *communitas*, which is characterized by the bonds existing between members. In modern society, there is the will to get immunized at all costs in the face of risks, to adopt means of separation and protection, material as well as symbolic, as seen in the crisis phase in the midst of the pandemic. The "immune" isolates himself in order to protect himself, frees himself from the bond of cooperation. As argued by Roberto Esposito, immunity is the dispensation of the obligation, the relief from the contract of the *Socìetas*. In fact, at least until the nineteenth century, the concept of *immunitas* essentially concerns the legal-political language and indicates a kind of safe conduct for some with respect to the law in force (Esposito 2022). The material and symbolic effects of the contagion thus reveal the vulnerability of modern social systems in the face of risk that is not unpredictable in itself, but a real possibility. Elias Canetti describes about what happens in great epidemics:

> The element of contagion, which plays so large a part in an epidemic, has the effect of making people separate from each other. The safest thing is to keep away from everyone else, for anyone may already have the infection on him. Some flee from the town and disperse to their estates; others shut themselves up in their houses and allow no-one in. Each man shuns every other; his last hope is to keep his distance. The prospect of life, and life itself, is expressed in terms of distance from the sick» (Canetti 1962, p. 753).

Contagion is then a political question because it concerns, in its effects and in its manifestation, the forms of association that are formed "spatially" (Simmel 1908). It disintegrates and separates, but contact is required for contagion to occur. *Con-tactus*, touch each other. Like culture, knowledge and values, contagion is transmitted, it passes from individual to individual. To infect one must act towards the other as the virus acts towards the cell. If it is true then, as Brossat argues (Brossat 2003), that democracies are self-immunized because they set themselves the goal of ensuring that no one is "violated", it is also true that the policies of contagion underpin their constitutive order. Liberal democracies construct themselves around the dialectic between actions concerning the self for "themselves" and actions concerning the self "for others". In the capitalistic world-system (Wallerstein 2006), liberal democracies represent the political apparatus in which the game of individual and collective responsibilities is fully realized. The well-known formula that Michel Foucault uses in the Stanford conference (1979), *omnes et singulatim*, sums up its essence. The liberal government of subjectivities does not only intend to generate citizens' obedience to the law, but by resorting to policies oriented towards well-being and optimization, it "leads" to the individualization of life. The pastoral government that Michel Foucault describes represents its form: «What I mean in fact is the development of power techniques oriented towards individuals and intended to rule them in a continuous and permanent way.

If the State is the political form of a centralised and centralising power, let us call pastorship the individualising power» (Foucault 1979, p. 227).

The guiding power of the shepherd that Foucault traces in the "Christian pastoralism" is exercised on the flock and not on earth (2004), and requires the specific knowledge of each individual member of the flock, of his public identity as well as of his soul. Furthermore, and this is the central aspect, this power that "leads and directs" is based on the principle of responsibility: «We saw that the shepherd was to assume responsibility for the destiny of the whole flock and of each and every sheep» (Foucault 1979, p. 236). The freedom of everyone for Foucault is not the result of the imposition of rules of conduct but the result of a consensual project that produces "normalization" from within. *Omnes et singulatim*, therefore, each and every one in their singularity. But it is the same liberal intellectuals such as sociologist Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse who believe that the construction of social liberty in the modern State rests on restraint, based on a contract. He already wrote in the early twentieth century that: «A man can be free to direct his own life only in so far as others are prevented from molesting and interfering with him» (Hobhouse 1911, p. 189). In this passage there is a clear reference to a third power capable of mediating between the individual and the community. In fact, in the rule of law of liberal education there is the idea that law, the guarantor of individual and collective freedoms, functions as a producer of "generalized trust". Rights, Alain Supiot (2005) reiterates – unlike law (*lex*) which is mandatory – is built around the idea of "direction" because it lays lines of conduct, the routes for the community to follow. In the Western tradition, it has an anthropological function which consists in instituting reason, Supiot believes, which holds within itself the symbolic dimension of the human with the biological dimension. But law in the Western world is an artificial construction, it is the product of society that is realized from the outside, we could say, by means of an authority that represents a form of power. And in fact, even Friedrich von Hayek, a leading thinker of liberal culture, is aware that the institutionalization of freedom can only take place through the exercise of power (1978). Indeed, he writes that the liberal conception of freedom lies in the capacity of the law to limit certain freedoms to guarantee them to all. For Hayek, the level of coercion (even in liberal democracies) can be mitigated but certainly cannot be undone. It is already evident in liberal England, around the mid-nineteenth century, when the relationship between individual freedom (of one's own body and own person) and public health becomes the cause of conflicts precisely following compulsory health measures. In 1840 the first *vaccination act* was launched, «the first incursion of the State, in the name of public health, into traditional civil liberties» (Wolfe, Sharp 2002, p. 430). Subsequently, the first «Compulsory vaccination was established by the Vaccination Act of 1853, following a report compiled by the Epidemiological Society on the state of vaccination since the passing of the first Vaccination Act of 1840» (Porter, Porter 1988, pp. 231-232). Although these laws represent an important political innovation in terms of public health, they generated strong movements of opposition to State medicine. As Nadja Durbach points out, Victorian England extends the reach of the State to areas that in the past were only private; it is at this time that «the anti-vaccinationism was a national movement, with strongest support in predominantly working-class regions and neighborhoods» (Durbach 2005, p. 92).

3. Moral and police policies in health government

The eighteenth century liberal principles an ideas based on the freedom of the person and on the free market were institutionalized in in the nation-State after the French Revolution. Two aspects coexist in it, sometimes in contradiction with each other: the sovereign people (the nation) whose members have equal rights and opportunities by birth, and the citizen's desire for independence (from the constraints of the State), which from John Locke onwards it becomes one of the founding principles of the liberal doctrine. Liberal thought is "institutionalized" in the midst of these tensions – between equality and individualism, between guarantee and

limitation of freedoms – the synthesis of which can only be found in the mode of government. Today as in the past, governmental policies on the Covid-19 epidemic in liberal States show that the threat is always looming and may call into question the balance of the social system. This is not a new matter that must be understood in the context of the socio-political changes that have swept Europe the moment capitalist society rose. Critical theorist Mark Neocleous believes that since the eighteenth century at least, it is precisely the difficulty of liberalism to fully grasp the nature of State power that leads to the us e of the police – the institution that deals with "fabricating social order" in society (2000) – compared to more than the simple use of force for the prevention and repression of crime. In that historical moment, police is in fact an institution that has the function of administrative and legislative regulation with the aim of promoting social peace and well-being in society, whose regulations are born first in Protestant States such as Germany and then in Catholic ones like France and Italy following the decline of the Church's judicial authority. The reasons for which the police system is rising are the collapse of the feudal system, the consequent birth of the capitalist system, the importance of the monetary economy, trade, industry, together with the articulated division of labor (Ivi, p. 1). Police is therefore the product of changes affecting modern society, new conditions of life, movement towards urban centers and social problems (vagrancy, inappropriate moral conduct, poverty) that afflict the modern State. Police as institution thus replaces the old feudal system of authority by now weakened with a "different" one, whose administrative functions are linked to the new bourgeois order that the power of the State favors. From the seventeenth century it can then be said that police is not specifically concerned with justice, but with the means necessary for the State for its growth, the increase of its forces, good social life and order within society (Foucault 2004). Its function is that of order production and conservation (Campesi 2009). As can be read in several essays, police departments have a dual role: "education and professionalization" of citizens, that is, to make the State prosper and regulate activities to ensure that everyone makes a contribution, has a profession and that idleness does not reign because harmful to the life of the State[4]. But for everyone to work, they need to be healthy. It is necessary to be vigilant on the possibility of spreading diseases, to take care of the healthiness of the places where miasmas can find diffusion. In France, for example, as Foucault points out, since the end of the eighteenth century a practice of epidemic control has been institutionalized which, on a territorial basis, involves administrators and doctors in real actions of government of the territory:

> A medicine of epidemics could exist only if supplemented by a police: to supervise the location of mines and cemeteries, to get as many corpses as possible cremated instead of buried, to control the sale of bread, wine, and meat, to supervise the running of abattoirs and dye works, and to prohibit unhealthy housing; after a detailed study of the whole country, a set of health regulations would have to be drawn up that would be read at service or mass, every Sunday and holy day, and which would explain how one should feed and dress oneself, how to avoid illness, and how to prevent or cure prevailing diseases (Foucault 1976, pp. 29-30).

However, as Mark Neocleous points out, liberalism helped transforming the concept of police in the late eighteenth century[5]. He writes that:

> In effect, as part of its wider ideological project, liberalism gave birth to the idea that any system of police should be founded on the liberty of the independent economically active and self-interested individual. This undermined the

[4]Reference is made here to what Michel Foucault (2004) says about the work of Turquet de Mayerne, La monarchie aristodémocratique written in 1611.
[5]Mark Neocleous also deals with the use of the term "police" in the writings of Adam Smith and its use in Great Britain and Europe (1997; 2000)

> police view that the population needed to be protected from the ravages of commercial activity and that 'order' required the extensive policing of the means of subsistence (Neocleous 2000, p. 36).

Therefore police system is also affected by the contradictions of liberalism; while independent activity is encouraged, at work for example – this is one of the tasks of the local police, as we have seen – it is impossible not to completely renounce the idea that such "selfish" independence can be harmful to society. This happens because in the eighteenth century, despite liberalism is affirming itself as a political doctrine centered on the individual and his autonomy from the State, the necessity of the social order is still functional to the organization of production, at least until, Neocleous argues, political economy does not definitively rise as an independent discipline. And then social order is also produced through health reform operations. The term medical police (Carrol 2002; Rosen 1953) often refers to State medicine and to everything concerning in those years the provisions about the health of citizens and the care of places. Gradually, during the nineteenth century, the activities of medical police are no longer considered adequate to the values of the bourgeois world (and thus give way to activities that are defined as "public health" or "public hygiene") (Rosen 1958; 1974). In the early nineteenth century in the treatise, the title of which is precisely "Polizia medica" (medical police), the Italian physician Lorenzo Martini (1834) highlights how often there is confusion between medical police and public hygiene. Public hygiene, he writes, deals with the precepts useful for preserving the "health of peoples" while the medical police has the objective of «knowing and perfecting man, not only man in particular, but the whole human generation, indeed to ensure happiness for those who will come after us» (Ivi p.17, transl. by the author). He believes that the task of the medical police is to take care of the physical man but also of the moral man (Ivi p.9), or everything that has to do with his individual faculties: «[...] therefore medicine can teach us the way to prepare souls for the cult of virtue» (Ivi p. 11, transl. by the author). Medical police is therefore almost a "science of government" which focus on many aspects of human existence, such as regulation of marital unions and sexual relations, the care of the body (of men and women), every aspect of childhood, social mores and sciences. It anticipates that work of "moral reform" which will then be the subject of hygienism throughout the nineteenth century up to a part of the twentieth century. It is not rare, in fact, to read in public hygiene manuals of the first half of the nineteenth century that the "depravity of morals", a product of the "moral decadence" of modern times, was the cause of the spread of infectious diseases (the correlation, for example, between juvenile masturbation and tuberculosis)[6]. It was good practice at that time for the bourgeois citizen to be well cared for and thus tame the "decadence of temperaments" typical of filthy and "morally contagious" poverty (Corbin 1982). What public hygiene treaties insisted on was basically about behavior. Illnesses and diseases, especially transmissible ones, were contained through sobriety and moral sanity. Physicians, hygienists and administrators were real "reformers" who introduced both sanitary and moral containment measures. Public authority therefore had the duty to orient towards virtues also in the field of public health, as well-known French forensic doctor Francois-Emmanuel Fodére clearly writes in his essay on forensic medicine and public hygiene:

> It belongs to the public authority to give you a profitable impulse: it is the soul of the social body; from its good or bad institutions more or less vigorous generations will necessarily be produced, more or less capable of resisting the destructive action of physical agents, more or less endowed with those magnanimous and generous virtues that are rarely encountered in weak and exhausting bodies (Fodére 1830, p.29, transl. by the author).

What happens between the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, when public hygiene becomes a biopolitical institution of government both for health and for behavior, is not so different

[6]See Foderè F. E. (1830)

from what happened (and perhaps still happens) in liberal democracies following the Covid-19 epidemic. Hygienism produces a series of indications that become the norm in people's ordinary life. Self-care, personal hygiene, and conducts to be followed become key principles of modernity through a moral pedagogy whose purpose is to govern customs, body and its potential "threat". Indeed, the threat affecting the human body is reflected on the body of the State, so much so that public safety, political security and the stability of global capitalism have been considered dependent on the "war on virus" which is fought through police measures, "lockdown, border closures, immunity passports, and immune surveillance systems" (Neocleous 2022). On the one hand, the return to behavior "re-education" and use of the body – a constant in modern history – is evident, on the other hand, the association between the citizen's body and the body of the State at a time when it seemed that globalization had canceled borders and weakened the nation State. Policies of epidemic management have attempted to "re-socialize" the collective subject to public authority through "rewriting of morality" and returning to give medicine a guiding function – to cure "citizens' body" to cure the body of the State – and a political role, greater than other knowledge, humanistic and philosophical above all, downgraded to knowledge of opinion. The symptom of this return to the "fabrication of order" is undoubtedly the political weakness suffered by liberal democracies which, with difficulty, try to produce a semblance of security by combining "concessions and obligations", as happened with the introduction of the vaccination pass in Italy, and investing more and more in morality considered a necessary tool to put order in individual conduct.

4. The biopolitical de-politicization

The meeting point between medical knowledge and social knowledge is undoubtedly the body and its conservation (Esposito 2011). The human and productive body but also the "social body" which becomes the object of interest of sociology with the studies of Émile Durkheim about what he calls "social morphology" (1897-1898). But the ("spatialized") body as a measure of balance is not central only to Durkheim and the organicist sociologists; already the Renaissance city is equated to the human body with its functions that organically keep the social system alive (the urban "arteries" that lead to the "heart" of the city). The relationship between urban space, body and disease is very close, and towards the end of the eighteenth century, it is following the spread of epidemics in the cities, as we saw, that what Foucault calls the "medical gaze" (Foucault 2003) is born. Disease is spatialized on the social (and urban) body and clinical medicine is born, whose field of observation extends to everything concerning human existence, so much so that every citizen – writes Foucault – gradually becomes aware of what is needed to know in the medical field. According to the French philosopher from here on, medical thought becomes a way of understanding social facts that is structured around the norm that separates what is normal from what is abnormal so as to make "corrections" that deeply transform the individual and his behavior (Foucault 1994). It is at this moment that the biological dimension that makes survival a "question of species" merges with politics that fully enters the space of existence. This link between power and life, between politics and existence, becomes central in the nineteenth century, Foucault believes, and is superimposed on the disciplinary power that was exercised instead on bodies (at work) from the end of the seventeenth century (Foucault 1975). From a certain moment on, the problem no longer concerns only individual bodies, their classification and optimization for economic purposes, but life in its purely biological essence through controls on births, deaths and diseases. What the French philosopher calls "biopolitics of the human species" integrates disciplinary political anatomy[7]. The object of the power-knowledge couple is no longer just the body subjected to work and production; from this moment on, biopolitical power deals with everything related to life and its preservation through techniques, knowledge and

[7]In this regard, see the lecture of March 17, 1976 at the Collège de France in Foucault (2003).

measurements in the field of demography, health, hygiene, safety (Ewald 1986). In this regard, the anthropologist Didier Fassin (2017) believes that Foucault's is rather a politics of the populations, demo-politics and not bio-politics.

At this point, it should be noted, that since political and health question of the spread of Covid began to be posed throughout the world, there have been many references to reflections on biopolitics – especially to the reading made by Michel Foucault. It was not actually a rediscovery, because biopolitical thought has long been a dominant thought in philosophical and social studies, even among those theoretical positions that are decidedly contradicting each other (Lemke 2011). The Covid-19 epidemic has only shifted, perhaps definitively, the focus on "life processes" by emphasizing the highly normative nature of the biological universal. Biopolitics, as a politics of protection of life, is a power that acts on the human rather than on the citizen, it is a political logic that subjects "bare life" to governance (Agamben 1995), life in its purely "organic", natural dimension. It is the full realization of a rationality that places the sacredness of the vital before "political and social rights". That in biopolitics there is a disappearance of politics is the thesis of Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller (1994) – probably not directly connected to Foucauldian analyzes (Hell 2007; Lemke 2011) – in which they highlight how in fact biopolitics represents a property of "postmodern politics" which is articulated around particularist and selective discourses. While politics represents a universal whose end is freedom or, in Marxian terms, liberation from the "unpolitical" power of authority, biopolitics is particularistic and values social identities based on alleged natural (biological) foundations such as those sexual, racial or even sanitary (Fehér, Heller 1994). The aim of politics is to place the political subject in a position of recognition and does not concern social identities but rather the collectivity (i.e. the universal) that underlies them[8]. On the one hand, therefore, freedom that is obtained through politics, and on the other, "life" that describes the expulsion of politics from the forms of government through the illusion of the liberation of the body which, according to the two authors, is imagined precisely by reform and emancipatory movements. The analysis of Heller and Fehér, sometimes considered reductionist (Lemke 2011), has the merit of opening to a reflection on the "problematization of the political" in contemporary society where, paraphrasing the authors, at the cost of one's life (or integrity of the body) one is willing to "sacrifice freedom" (Fehér, Heller 1994, p.104). We can believe that, although in modern society the possibility of gaining rights, spaces of freedom and of discussion with regard to the power apparatus is increasingly widening, it is also true that this happens through the inscription of life in those same apparatuses, independently by the needs of everyone or by structural inequalities. This means, Heller and Fehér reiterate, that biopolitics can be a form of politics both of the totalitarian society in which free political institutions exist, as well as of the totalitarian society where free institutions do not exist.

On the other hand, Giorgio Agamben, a philosopher of biopolitics – who, as Alain Supiot writes, has the merit of recognizing that the links between human life and institutions are structural and do not go back to the nineteenth century (Supiot 2021) – argues that the history of power is basically all pervaded by biopolitics. The same principle of inviolability of the person, the *habeas corpus* of 1679 is a demonstration of this; he who is brought before the court of justice must have a body – "having a body" – to be judged. To verify its historical presence, a body and not a citizen is necessary, therefore the *zoè* (bare life) not the *bios* (the qualified life of the citizen)[9]. In particular, Agamben, re-reading Carl Schmitt's political theology (1922), in which sovereign power represents the affirmation of the state of exception, extends biopolitics to a more pervasive form of government than sovereignty itself. He writes: «Along with the emerge of biopolitics, we can observe a displacement and gradual expansion beyond the limits of the decision of bar life, in the state of exception, in

[8]Regarding this, see also Agnes Heller's essay about the way in which biopolitics is changing politics (1996) and the speech Biopolitics and modernity (Heller 2003) which she discusses in a seminar at Sapienza, University of Rome.

[9]As Roberto Esposito writes, from the point of view of Greek lexicon «(…) biopolitics refers, if anything, to the dimension of *zoe*, which is to say to life in its simple capacity [tenuta], more than it does to *bíos*, understood under "qualified life" or "form of life", or at least to the line of conjugation along which *bíos* is exposed to *zoe*, naturalizing *bíos* as well» (2008, p. 14).

which sovereignty consist» (Agamben 1998, p. 122). Agamben expands Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics who instead, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, writes that biopolitics was born in a particular phase of history as a reaction to those powers, therefore to politics, which in past centuries, through the law, they have invested their lives in a coercive way: «life as a political object was in a sense taken at face value and turned back against the system that was bent on controlling it. It was life more than the law that became the issue of political struggles, even if the latter were formulated through affirmations concerning rights» (Foucault 1978, p. 145).

In the first lesson he gives at the Collége de France in the course *Security, territory and population* (1977-78) Foucault starts by saying that with the word biopower he indicates «(…) the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species» (Foucault 2007, p. 1). Thus, biopower exists in those socio-political systems whose object is the human species understood in its biological dimension and where every human being is rigorously defined as a member of a biological species to be monitored and controlled (Horton 2021). It is a characteristic of the "biopolitical state" – as Sara Horton calls it – to monitor the population understood as "a whole" from potential threats, which can be foreigners, unwanted or particular categories of citizens from time to time (Horton 2021, p. 721), activating a soft mechanism of protection / exclusion which, more than on the delimitation of the territory, is based on the circulation within it with the aim of distinguishing what is good from what is bad, like Foucault himself highlights in his lecture (Foucault 2007, p. 65). It is evident that Foucault does not consider biopower in repressive terms; however, the "optimizing" biopolitical power, in redefining the "political status of the human in biological terms", discriminates and privileges by putting in conflict the right to life[10] and citizenship as an expression of recognition in the political space and of social rights. And in fact, as Lorenzini writes in his analysis of biopolitics at the time of Covid19, biopolitics is always a policy of differential vulnerability: «The differential exposure of human beings to health and social risks is, according to Foucault, a salient feature of biopolitical governmentality […] In short – Lorenzini continues – biopolitics is always a politics of differential vulnerability. Far from being a politics that erases social and racial inequalities by reminding us of our common belonging to the same biological species, it is a politics that structurally relies on the establishment of hierarchies in the value of lives, producing and multiplying vulnerability as a means of governing people» (Lorenzini 2021, pp. 43-44). The biopolitical logic of protecting the population in the pandemic crisis worked more or less in this way. The same campaign for mass vaccinations – never imagined in the course of history at this scale (McKeown 1976) – was moved by a biopolitical logic in which the increasing weight of the biological and the progressive decline of the political was evident. Especially in the first phase of vaccine delivery in Italy, putting "(biological) life before rights" ended up keeping out some social categories such as the infirm, the elderly, some categories of workers who had a greater need to be protected, triggering a mechanism of "biopolitical competition". The same can be said of the unequal distribution of vaccines globally. The biopolitical state attempts a reorganization of the relationship between political life and biological life, but in reconfiguring this relationship, it reproduces a hierarchy which, in the case of the Covid epidemic, operated through moral imperatives, "the responsibility of each to all", delegating to the population the recomposition of the collective trust agreement. In fact, if we consider the Italian case – but probably the discussion can be extended to many other countries – this happened right from the start. During the outbreak

[10]In the work of Michel Foucault, in particular in his "*The History of sexuality*" (1978), the right to life can be understood through the change that power assumes in the modern age. Power is no longer a manifestation of the "right to take", but also of "conceding". Power is used to "guarantee" life. But even wars, writes Foucault, are waged in the name of collective existence (and not for death), consequently the danger becomes a biological question. «One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of biological danger to others» (Foucault 1978, p. 138).

of the pandemic, almost everyone complied with the rules and accepted the harsh restrictions. A self-control mechanism within the population was activated; biopolitical power highlighted how the need for "self-preservation" – health and safety above all – prevailed over the need for mobility, aggregation, interaction and even "economics" (except in those cases where large corporations' interests were at stake).Furthermore, as happened in the past with the epidemics in the eighteenth century, biopolitical power was supported by technical skills – statistical, demographic, clinical – which gave shape to technocratic reason, as we will see in the next section.

5. Technique in government

The Covid-19 epidemic has shown that life is the absolute highest value in the modern world, and that it must be safeguarded in every way and always, even by sacrificing freedoms and rights. Yet, in that same world, in the wake of the pandemic crisis, the war crisis in the heart of Europe once again brings life into question. But who can really saves life and by what "rationality"? During the pandemic crisis, in many countries, governments made use of "experts", especially physicians, virologists, statisticians who, with data and numbers, in the media, indicated what sacrifices were necessary to save lives (Fassin 2021). Numbers have become an instrument of government and technicians, custodians of the knowledge necessary to govern. Experts have long played an important role in political action in many fields where they represent the legitimacy of technical competence and scientific knowledge in decision-making processes (Caselli 2020). In the case of the Covid pandemic, the technocracy of experts (Fisher 1990) in place of politics has led to the introduction of measures that have profoundly reconfigured the social but also political structures of society, and have reconfigured the nature of liberal democracies[11]. "Believe in science" was the political imperative that occupied the media space. Although there is much talk of unscientific sentiment, «(…) scientists and technocrats and scientific/technocratic attitudes continue to play a major role in our lives» (Olson 2016, p.138) as evidenced by the presence of experts on television talk shows and the reference, even in the mainstream media, to scientific results in peer-reviewed journals, particularly in the medical and biological area. Technocracy, in fact, as political rationality of experts not belonging to the world of politics, appeals to scientific knowledge or, as some write (Olson 2016; Esmark 2020), to scientism (not necessarily understood in negative terms), or the tendency to shift scientific knowledge into many fields of human experience. However, as some studies report (Bucchi 2009; Olson 2016), scientists often feel frustrated when their advice is ignored and challenged by ideas they consider irrational, such as religious or political ideas they tend to describe as "Obscurantists". Scientific popularization is basically born with this vocation of "scientific literacy" which concerns not only the people but also, as it happened in Italy, entrepreneurs and politicians (Olson 2016). It is possible, however, that one can fall into insignificant definitions as happened with the journalistic simplification "no vax" that some doctors and virologists have used[12] – a recent invention that arose in the Italian debate when the number of compulsory vaccinations for children was extended by the Lorenzin law in 2017 (Gardini 2020) – which indicates the different positions (skeptical, hesitant or critical) towards vaccines (Gobo, Sena 2019). It is an epistemological reduction that aims to relegate the discussion to a "marginal" political space. That "no" indicates an absolute, an indisputable "no", a denial based on "faith" in something of which one does not have full knowledge. This operation tends to synthesize the complexity of

[11] It's well-known that the State, in liberal thinking, must not interfere with the lives of citizens, even though, as Norberto Bobbio points out (2006), the constraints on his functions correspond to an inevitable "exercise of central power" necessary to guarantee individual freedoms. With the sudden crisis created by Covid-19, the balance of democratic governance changed, especially with regard to the separation of powers. For example, in the Italian case, as well as elsewhere (Windholz 2020), the parliament ceded part of its powers to the executive branch, which by using technicians, created a greater centralization of power.

[12]The Italian virologist and academic Roberto Burioni, a well-known scientific popularizer, very present in the media, was among those who used the expression "no vax" a lot.

a social phenomenon[13] so as to convey more "simple" meanings that outline its irrationality. The positivist thought of the nineteenth century, in whose aura sociology was born, is affirmed precisely with the aim of overcoming the "anti-scientific" thought, which Auguste Comte believed was typical of the premature phases of society, of the theological stage and of the metaphysical stage. In fact, he writes in his *Cours de philosophie positive* which is published between 1830 and 1842, that it is the affirmation of the "scientific spirit" that can preserve society forever from the return of the theological spirit and from the consequent retrograde aberrations (Comte 1967). The idea that science can be the only knowledge capable of saving from aberrations also returns today, indeed, already after World War II, the scholars of the Frankfurt research institute felt that the primacy of scientific thought was gradually replacing philosophical thought giving shape to a new rationality: «Today there is almost general agreement that society has lost nothing by the decline of philosophical thinking, for a much more powerful instrument of knowledge has taken its place, namely, modern scientific thought. It is often said that all the problems that philosophy has tried to solve are either meaningless or can be solved by modern experimental methods» (Horkheimer 2004, p.40) writes Max Horkheimer in his work on the decline of reason in the Western world. It's the years following the tragedy of the Second World War whose devastating effects have strongly affected the reflections of the philosophers of Frankfurt who emigrated to the United States due to Nazi violence. And following the war crisis, while Europe is trying to resurrect and the United States is the power at the head of the capitalist world, Max Horkheimer writes that the reason of the modern and western world is guided by "instrumental rationality", the aim of which is not the formation of conscience or knowledge, but the validity of procedures useful for achieving goals that they are usually taken for granted and are supposed to be self-explanatory (Ivi p. 3). Subjective reason, the reason that everyone uses to carry out actions that they consider reasonable, writes Horkhemeir, does not concern itself with the reasonableness of the ends, it assumes that they are and that they therefore respond to the interest of the subject for self-preservation, «[…] be it that of the single individual, or of the community on whose maintenance that of the individual depends» (Ivi p.3). Subjective reason has an immediately utilitarian function, therefore, and is foreign to the conception of objective reason which, Horkheimer points out, was typical of the ancient world and was based on the idea that there was a relationship between individuals, institutions and nature: «The degree of reasonableness of a man's life could be determined according to its harmony with this totality. Its objective structure, and not just man and his purposes, was to be the measuring rod for individual thoughts and actions» (Ivi p.4). Objective reason is not a faculty of the mind, even if it does not exclude that everyone can have their own rationality of course; rather it represents the sense of harmony of individuals with the world and with the social system. Subjective reason, on the other hand, is a tool, a means of subduing the world and nature and projecting political action into the field of profit, as happens in the market in capitalist society. The return of positivist reason, explains Horkheimer, aims to bend reality to one's own interests, to bend the world to the domain of scientific knowledge, a unique tool for progress. In this there is a critique of the positivist view of science which risks becoming mechanistic knowledge in the hands of technocrats. «Technocracy – wrote Frank Fischer in one of the first works on the subject – in classical political terms, refers to a system of governance in which technically trained experts rule by virtue of their specialized knowledge and position in dominant political and economic institutions» (Fischer 1990, p.17). Horkheimer is clear in delineating this passage: «Plato wanted to make philosophers the masters; the technocrats want to make engineers the board of directors of society. Positivism is philosophical technocracy. It specifies as the prerequisite for membership in the councils of society an exclusive faith in mathematics» (Horkheimer 2004, p.41).

In the current phase of liberal-meritocratic capitalism (Milanovic 2019) we are facing a new technocracy based on the idea that performance management must be driven by the best available scientific evidence (Esmark 2020, p.222). Unlike what happened with social-democratic capitalism up to the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century in which technicians were important but had no power (Braun 2021), in Italy there was a "scientization of politics" (Esmark 2017) which resulted in the introduction of technical measures with

[13]The history of anti-vaccination is a complex history on which there are many studies. Consider in this regard (Blume 2006; 2017).

little political debate. A rather indicative case was the extension of the mandatory certificate of vaccination (green pass) to certain categories of workers – to casual workers, to temporary workers, to workers at risk of being laid off – without any discussion with the trade unions. Measures such as these have amplified the horizontal conflict between categories of workers (those who perceived themselves as disadvantaged versus those who they considered privileged) with consequent erosion of social ties. The hierarchical relationship between political power and the power of experts (Esmark 2017) has therefore been reversed, thus allowing technocratic governance to exert a greater grip on the political system as well as on the people. The result is what many scholars define as technopopulism (Bickerton, Invernizzi Accetti 2021; Urbinati 2022), a system in which people from outside the political world considered "professionally effective and very popular" are considered the only ones capable of holding positions with political responsibility. Therefore, technocracy replaces party politics in liberal democracies. Indeed, it is the first sign of the crisis of politics as universal and its definitive replacement with «(…) "rational" empirical/analytical methodologies of scientific decision making (Fisher 1990, p.22)».

It is necessary to return to consider the idea of reason, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1947) warned, or to keep in mind that the real and the rational do not always coincide and that reason may not be an instrument of liberation from the fears and contradictions of the modern world.

Herbert Marcuse, who among the sociologists of the Frankfurt school is remembered as the sociologist of '68, saw in technocracy the instrument of government in capitalist modernity, which could have a function both in the "realms of terror", as in Nazi Germany, as in modern democracies, where it becomes the vector of standardized mass production. As Marcuse warned, this instrumental conception of technological rationality (1964) is extending to the entire "field of thought", conferring also the qualification of intellectual activities as purely technical activities (Marcuse 1941). In the same way that in the world of corporate capitalism there has been the rise of new figures, managers, so in politics there are "experts", a new category of professionals who govern according to the rationality of competence and technique.

This means that "emergencyism" can become a paradigm of government, denying politics as universal and reducing issues such as safety, health and well-being of the community to corporate "problem solving".

6. The dialectic of "big Other"

«Security is the highest social concept of civil society, the concept of police, expressing the fact that the whole of society exists only in order to guarantee to each of its members the preservation of his person, his rights, and his property. It is in this sense that Hegel calls civil society the state of need and reason. The concept of security does not raise civil society above its egoism. On the contrary, security is the insurance of egoism»[14], writes Karl Marx in *On the Jewish Question* (1844). Marx is very clear that security is a necessity of society which tends to preserve itself and its members. However – it was mentioned in the introduction of this paper – he notes a fracture between civil society and State. If on the one hand it is in the political community that everyone can see their rights guaranteed, on the other it is political life itself that limits them because it represents the guarantee of the rights of the individual man, therefore in contradiction with his ultimate goal. For Marx, what holds individuals together in the modern State is their individual interest, the maintenance of "their own state" – that is, their property. The selfish man is the member of civil society who becomes a member of the State. Political emancipation, the granting by the State of rights and freedoms to citizens, does not therefore necessarily represent a form of liberation; the fact that the State is free does not mean that all its members are free. In Marx's words: «Political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of civil society, to an egoistic, independent individual, and, on the other hand, to a citizen, a juridical person»[15]. How do we think about security today in the relationship between civil society and State? If in the

[14]https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/
[15]https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/

ancient world it was God or the Sovereign who protected (but also punished), in rational and technological modernity, free individuals obtain protection through the institutions of society that they themselves created and towards which they are not vassals but subjects of right. From the absolute power of the Hobbesian Leviathan, who through fear dominates the "state of nature" (to safeguard life), to the "state of freedom" but of constant insecurities that modern society of late capitalism produces (Castel 2003). The dream of preserving society is mirrored by the nightmare of destruction and catastrophe. Catastrophe, not surprisingly, means total change, the reversal of the state of things, something that the modern world is no longer used to, if we read the facts from a dialectical perspective.

We have seen that biopower, as productive power, makes use of calculations – statistical, demographic, clinical measurement, etc. – to "take charge of life" and to regulate the activities of the population. However, social inequalities continue to exist: the profound disparities within populations that hide the social implications of epidemics – the concept of syndemic[16] demonstrates this well (Horton 2020) – still remain little considered. The Covid pandemic has definitively transformed our era into a "biopolitical era" or "biologically political" – beyond perhaps the Foucauldian analysis – and has transformed the "internal conflict" (between classes, between groups, between minorities of different nature) in "internal threat". The problem in the biopolitical era does not seem to be so much the lack of access for some to the possibilities that society offers and the possibility of guaranteeing treatment (in the specific case of Covid), as the threat of those who are "biologically dangerous" for others (for their social position or their choices). The risk is that biopolitics can definitively replace the politicization of the "social question" (Heller 1996) through the use of techniques (statistics, medicine) not aimed at reducing social inequalities.

Dialectical thought – as the thought of "overthrow" – has the task of bringing conflict back into the political space. It is around the thought of contradiction that critical and philosophical thought is born which, unlike the positivist sociology of the origins which observes social facts as "things" (Durkheim 1982), is based on the assumption that facts do not correspond to how they appear to be or are imposed (Marcuse 1982). Dialectical thought no longer receives great attention in the field of philosophical and social studies today, perhaps because of the primacy of political technocracy in providing effective answers on citizens' life, beyond "objective reason". Dialectics is the method of change, it is a mental faculty – as Marcuse defines it – which allows us to think about contradictions; «While the scientific method leads from the immediate experience of things to their logical-mathematical structure, philosophical thought leads from the immediate experience of existence to its historical structure: the principle of freedom» (Marcuse 1982, p.446). What Marcuse questions is once again the technical society, supported by the centrality of scientific thought that cannot imagine the contradiction underlying the real world. There is a point from which to start, writes Marcuse, to understand the world: for dialectical thought the world is not free (ibidem), man and nature live in a condition of alienation and it is up to philosophical thought to resolve this contradiction and become aware of what reality "actually" is. According with Karel Kosìk «Dialectics is after the "thing itself". But the thing itself does not show itself to man immediately» (Kosík 1976, p.1). Dialectical thinking sets itself the goal of going beyond the objectivity of things, and therefore also of power, which, when it becomes absolute, tends to deny any form of opposition by passing as irrational any other form of critical thinking. More than tracing the threat that undermines the balance, then, it is necessary to understand the conflict and contradiction within society.

Scientific thought, at the service of technocratic reason, ends up being the instrument of a rationality that dominates "over everything", even over thought itself. And then catastrophe – the epidemic crisis (or syndemic crisis) – can bring back thinking about the contradiction and imagining the possible change in the political community. Because the impression one gets is that citizens' security rather means security of the State, its salvation in the face of the catastrophe, this time also political, which in this historical moment does not spare the democratic State. In a state of emergency, in the partial suspension of the democratic order caused by the

[16]In September 2020 Richard Horton editor in chief of "The Lancet" journal, in a small comment, brings to the attention of the public the concept of syndemic, not new in the language of medicine, to highlight the importance of the relationship between effects of Covid19 and social and ethnic minority vulnerabilities. Horton emphasizes the importance of an integrated, therefore social, economic and clinical approach to disease control.

epidemic, the State manifests itself as the Lacanian "big Other", the symbolic order that regulates social life and through which it attempts to reconstruct the real. The biopolitical state that protects itself from the "biological threat" by forgetting the internal contradictions (disparities, inequality, social differences, etc. ...). Can the symbolic order always neutralize the trauma and bring the catastrophe back to social peace? People are willing to sacrifice themselves when they have faith in the "big Other" – writes Slavoj Zizek re-reading Lacan – and in sacrificing themselves they find their place in the community, but when they stop believing in the big Other, the risk is the collapse of the social pact (Žižek 1993, p. 232). The collapse can be sudden, unexpected, sometimes caused by insignificant events and break the symbolic order that constitutes the social bond:

> The feature common to all these moments of the big Other's collapse is their utter unpredictability: nothing really great happened, yet suddenly the spell was broken, "nothing was the same as before," reasons which a moment ago were perceived as reasons for (obeying the Power), now function as reasons against. What a moment ago evoked in us a mixture of fear and respect is now experienced as a rather different mixture of ridiculous imposture and brutal, illegitimate display of force. It is clear, therefore, how this shift is of a purely symbolic nature: it designates neither a change in social reality (there, the balance of power remains exactly the same) nor a "psychological" change, but a shift in the symbolic texture which constitutes the social bond (Ivi, pp. 234-235).

The big Other therefore exists only through those who believe in it; when you stop believing in it, its reality fails. If the symbolic order falls, the foundations of society fall (Žižek 2012). Those who obey the laws because they consider them just – Pierre Bourdieu writes in Pascalian meditations (1997) – obey the justice that he imagines, he does not obey the essence of the law, which is law and nothing else. Therefore, the big Other needs to protect itself and the catastrophe is the signal of his own crisis: endemic crisis (Szendy 2020)[17] of biopolitical state. The goal of dialectical thought is then to overturn the order of things, not only by criticizing conformity but by noting the existence of other possibilities. Thought understands reality and by understanding, it corresponds to it when it transforms it, as in the Marxian teaching. But it can do this if it understands its contradictory nature, if the reverse is resolved, that is the trauma, the catastrophe.

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[17]Peter Szendy's reflection deals with the difference between epidemics and endemics in Michel Foucault's lesson. See Foucault (2003, p. 243).

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