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## **Catherine Malabou's Eco-anarchism: *Environnementalité* and the Non-governable**

### **O Eco-anarquismo de Catherine Malabou: *Environnementalité* e o não-governável**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper argues that Catherine Malabou's notion of the non-governable poses an unresolvable difficulty for Michel Foucault's concept of *Environnementalité*, or what has come to be termed eco-governmentality. I show that, while Foucault's analysis remains indispensable for ecophilosophy today, he nevertheless failed to deconstruct the insidious forms of modern sovereignty that he so clearly illuminated. I approach the problem from two angles presenting Foucault's analyses of both the living being and the environment. I show that a hegemonic order dominates the body and, by extension, its surroundings. I then turn to Malabou's incapacitation of these hegemonic orders that continue to devastate the ecological world. Malabou shows that the Earth itself is a volatile site of non-governability that deconstructs the incessant attempts of power to dominate it.

#### **Keywords**

Catherine Malabou. Michel Foucault. Non-governable. *Environnementalité*. Eco-governmentality.

#### **Resumo**

Este artigo argumenta que a noção de não-governável de Catherine Malabou apresenta uma dificuldade insolúvel para o conceito de *environnementalité* de Michel Foucault, ou o que veio a ser chamado de eco-governamentalidade. Mostro que, embora a análise de Foucault permaneça indispensável para a ecofilosofia atual, ele não conseguiu desconstruir as formas insidiosas da soberania moderna que ele tão claramente

iluminou. Abordo o problema a partir de dois ângulos, apresentando as análises de Foucault sobre o ser vivo e o meio ambiente. Demonstro que uma ordem hegemônica domina o corpo e, por extensão, seu ambiente. Em seguida, volto-me para a incapacitação dessas ordens hegemônicas por Malabou, que continuam a devastar o mundo ecológico. Malabou mostra que a própria Terra é um local volátil de não-governabilidade que desconstrói as incessantes tentativas do poder de dominá-la.

### Palavras-chave

Catherine Malabou. Michel Foucault. Não-governável. *Environnementalité*. Eco-governamentalidade.

In *Stop Thief! Anarchism and Philosophy*, Catherine Malabou reads the “anarchist spatialization” of geographers Élysée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin as vacating nature of historical mechanisms of domination. According to Malabou, there is “a dawning awareness that philosophy is lagging behind” when it comes to the politics of horizontality. Anarchist geography is, however, on the forefront of the horizontal reorganization of natural history because it rids the natural environment of absolute beginnings and historical domination. For Reclus and Kropotkin, anarchism is not connected to disorganization as is commonly assumed; rather, it is a political order without hegemonic power, mastery, or sovereignty. Reclus writes, “Our political aim... is the absence of government, it is anarchy, the highest expression of order” (qtd. in MALABOU, 2023, p. 2). The anarchist reorganization of space presents the natural environment as the crisscrossing of biological life and history. As Malabou puts it:

Kropotkin, too, understood the ground we stand on not merely as inorganic fact but rather as the tangled traces of life. All across the Eastern steppes, palimpsests of evolution offer brilliant, frozen memories of relations between the animal world, humans, and the desert. A forebear of social geography and ecology, anarchist spatialization works tirelessly to achieve a political vision of horizontality. (MALABOU, 2023, pp. 1-2)

Kropotkin keys in precisely to this playful temporality, as Malabou notes, in his narrative of Proudhon's first inception of anarchy half a century earlier. Kropotkin describes Proudhon's invention of anarchy precisely as the reorganization of time: “under the name of Anarchy, a new

interpretation of the past and present life of society arises, giving at the same time a forecast as regards its future" (qtd. in MALABOU, 2023, p. 16).

To understand how a monolithic conception of time (its irreversibility) and vertical politics came to inhabit geography in the first place, we ought to consider the origin of the notion *archē* that anarchism disrupts. In Malabou words, "Anarchy comes from the Greek *an-arkhia*, which literally means without an *arkhè* – that is, without a principle, which in turn means both inception and commandment" (MALABOU, 2022, p. 216). Anarchism then, the deconstruction of the primacy of the *archē*, cannot avoid calling into question the beginning. Malabou points out that in defining the philosophical meaning of *archē*, it was Aristotle who united the two distinct meanings, beginning and commanding. This unity of inception and commandment had incredibly far-reaching consequences. In her chapter on Reiner Schürmann's ontological anarchy in *Stop Thief!*, Malabou draws out these ramifications:

By melding the two meanings of beginning and commanding into an indissoluble unit, Aristotle projects the horizontal properties of space and time onto the incline of ontological hierarchies. Henceforth, to precede in time and space means to overlook and subordinate. (MALABOU, 2023, p. 43)

This ontological slope away from the origin installs a governing logic that will push everything that falls into the political arena to obey the command of the *archē*, Malabou continues: "this declivity is the origin of governability. The relation of the general to his soldiers, just like that of the governing to the governed" (MALABOU, 2023, p. 43). In contrast to historical approaches which "whatever their methodology, inevitably reproduce hierarchical interpretations of dominant positions" (MALABOU, 2023, p. 1), anarchist spatialization explodes the foundation of the vantage point and supplants the governing logic of the *archē*, the "internal tyrant," with a horizontal organization of time and space.

For anarchist geography, the natural environment is entangled with history. There is a volatile dynamic stemming from the reversibility of time and space so that the *archē*, the governing logic of the beginning, can never fully assimilate biological life. Malabou cites the following

formulation from Reclus: “Geography is none other than history in space, in the same way that history is geography in time” (qtd. in MALABOU, 2023, p. 1). In turn, Malabou’s dawning philosophical anarchism reinterprets the past, present and future as a plastic ecology to come, without the master of the beginning. Malabou writes, “To refuse verticality is not to walk in the plains. It is, instead, an entirely different way of knowing how to boldly face the expanse. It is a knowledge that is another means of presenting the relief” (MALABOU, 2023, p. 1). For Malabou biology is plastic because there is no absolute division between symbolic life and biological life. There is a reciprocity and a tension between the two terms that will never be resolved because the biological cannot be governed by political discourse:

The articulation of political discourse on bodies is always partial, for it cannot absorb everything that the structure of the living being is able to burst open by showing the possibilities of a reversal in the order of generations, a complexification in the notion of heritage, a calling into question of filiation, a new relation to death and the irreversibility of time, through which emerges a new experience of finitude. (MALABOU, 2022, p. 235)

This reversibility in the chain of command is what makes life anarchic, and at the same time political. Anarchist geography shakes the political of the ground from which inception and commandment derive their authority, and a new contradictory anarchic order emerges that is capable of both generating ideological political discourses and destabilizing them.

### **The Passage of Sovereignty into Eco-governmentality**

No one saw so clearly as Michel Foucault the entanglement of ecology with politics. Through a political technique that he termed *Environnementalité* (in notes to the 78-79 lectures “The Birth of Biopolitics,” a concept that has since come to be called eco-governmentality), Foucault describes the way that the natural environment has been absorbed by politics. Eco-governmentality names the secret alliance between epistemology and vertical politics to normalize life and its surroundings through the construction of hierarchical relationships. For Foucault, as Malabou puts

it, “Governmentality’ refers to the multiple sets of techniques that aim at normalizing subjects and populations” (MALABOU, 2022, p.222). In the 78-79 lectures, Foucault shows how (eco)knowledge is constructed as the vehicle for modern sovereignty under the regime of (eco)governmentality. However, for this collusion of knowledge and political power to function eco-governmentality must conceal the non-governability of the natural environment.

Up until the last lectures on Diogenes the Cynic,<sup>1</sup> Foucault saw an unretractable entwinement of the government with the production of knowledge. That life and its surroundings came to be subject to this new control center was made possible in Foucault’s genealogy by the explosion of sovereignty in the Classical age beginning roughly half-way through the seventeenth century. After the destruction of sovereignty, natural life and the environment became subject to political power via epistemological relationships established by scientific disciplines amongst various other institutions. To show how a modern form of sovereignty comes to inhabit nature via the environmental sciences, it is necessary to first follow Foucault’s double critique of governmentality and sovereignty. While Foucault’s analyses of biopolitics and governmentality illuminate the strategies by which sovereignty reconstitutes itself, my argument will be that his approach nevertheless leaves its basic structure intact. By contrast, Malabou’s anarchist affirmation of the non-governability of nature completely levels sovereignty.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the destruction of sovereignty in the Classical age and the subsequent absorption of life processes by political power. It was this erasure of the boundary between the living subject and the political subject that will, in Malabou’s words, “act[] as the characteristic trait of modern sovereignty” (MALABOU, 2022, p. 227). For Foucault, sovereignty initially reemerges from the wreckage as disciplinary power, an indirect power to punish individuals for transgressions rather than an absolute right over life and death. But a second form, not antithetical to discipline, would soon accompany it, that

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<sup>1</sup> See the chapter “Anarcheology: Michel Foucault’s Last Government” in *Stop Thief!*

focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population. (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 139)

This second form of power over life shifts the emphasis away from the individual punishment of pathological subjects, towards the development of more subtle tactics for normalizing the population by promoting life. Foucault writes, “The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (FOUCAULT, 1978, pp. 139-140). These two forms of power over life, discipline and management, develop separately over the course of the nineteenth century until they amalgamate with the onset of Foucauldian modernity. While the modern state no doubt continues to expose the lives of minority individuals to death, this is only one form of power among many. Mechanisms of power in the modern age also work “to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (FOUCAULT, 1978, p. 136).

In the 78-79 lectures, Foucault points out that environmental technologies are crucial to the functioning of the government, or what he had begun to term “governmentality” in his lectures the previous year. Governmentality describes the processes more broadly by which the population rather than the individual is managed. Contemporary mechanisms of power are not engaged, Foucault says, in a “project of an exhaustively disciplinary society” (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 259); nor is “the exclusion of those who cannot be normalized [] needed” (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 259). Beginning in the eighteenth century, biopolitics developed a wide range of more subtle tactics and mechanisms for controlling the artificial or urban environment of pathological subjects. The field of action is structured by power relations in such a way to achieve a homeostasis, as Foucault puts it, “in which action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players, and finally in which there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of

individuals” (FOUCAULT, 2008, pp. 259-260). Often, the environmental controls Foucault has in mind are clearly such artificial habitats as the domicile, the institution and the urban environment. Control over these constructed environments becomes a tactic to normalize minority individuals and practices. Governmentality shapes spaces, schools, neighborhoods, bedrooms, hospitals, prisons and so on to maintain a certain visibility, security, regularity in courses of action in the private and public arena. Dispersed power relationships develop architectural strategies to create a docile homogenous population, rather than strictly managing the individuals that inhabit these spaces.

In the 75-76 lectures “Society Must be Defended,” we read that biopolitics involves “the problem of the environment to the extent that it is not a natural environment, that it has been created by the population and therefore has effects on that population. This is, essentially, the urban problem” (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 245). However, Foucault also clearly means the intervention of biopolitics into the natural environment. Amongst the more subtle rational mechanisms employed by biopolitics, the natural environment becomes important for managing public hygiene. In the lecture given on 17 March 1976, Foucault says:

Biopolitics' last domain is, finally—I am enumerating the main ones, or at least those that appeared in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; many others would appear later—control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they live. This includes the direct effects of the geographical, climatic, or hydrographic environment: the problem, for instance, of swamps, and of epidemics linked to the existence of swamps throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 245)

Here it is important that we are careful to note that the natural environment is not an external threat to the life of the population that needs to be protected against by government agencies and to be studied by the environmental sciences; rather, the environment emerges as a technique of biopolitics for normalizing its subjects.

Under the new regime of biopolitics, the environment serves two functions as a political technique leveraged to control life; it is both a repository of forces to be extracted for sustaining

life and a threat to which heterogenous elements in the population can be exposed. Guided by these two poles, biopolitics constructs the environment as just one of its many forces for normalizing the population: “biopolitics will derive its knowledge from, and define its power’s field of intervention in terms of, the birth rate, the mortality rate, various biological disabilities, and the effects of the environment” (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 245). Meaning, as a vehicle of modern sovereignty, the natural environment comes to refer to its opposite: domestication and the law of the master.

### **The “Discovery” of the Environment as a Historical Artifact**

For Foucault, the natural sciences beginning in the seventeenth century still harbor the remains of the sovereign. This is visible in the hegemonic order of their “discoveries.” In his archaeological examinations of nature in *The Order of Things*, Foucault shows that nature is a historical artifact that goes through radically discontinuous phase shifts. For example, he uncovers the emergence of concepts such as “life” and the “environment” as epistemological constructs in the archeological record at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The environment appears, for Foucault, as the result of life tearing itself away from the taxonomic grid of denominations that had confined the living being of the Classical age (beginning roughly half-way through the seventeenth century). For the Classical *episteme*, nature was understood as a system of nomenclature interwoven with the surface characteristics of living beings. “Nature,” was understood as “a homogenous space of orderable identities and differences” (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 292). Prior to the inception of the biological concepts of life and the environment, in the Classical *episteme* “it was not possible to represent what separated the being from itself” (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 297). Rather, the scientific discourse of natural history developed a taxonomic language that brought order to the surface characteristics of living beings and made nature visible. In the Classical *episteme*,

Things and words are very strictly interwoven: nature is posited only through the grid of denominations, and – though without such names it would remain mute and invisible – it glimmers far off beyond them,



continuously present on the far side of this grid, which nevertheless presents it to our knowledge and renders it visible only when wholly spanned by language. (FOUCAULT, 2002, pp. 174-175)

In the Classical period “life does not exist: only living beings” (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 175), and living beings are ordered according to the similitude of their surface characteristics. Nature forms a continuous totality without any interruption with the environment. This linguistic grid is replaced in the nineteenth century by biology where “life” appears as a consequence of “the subordination of character to function in living beings” (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 236). The continuity of natural beings in the earlier *episteme*, where “classifiers had been establishing character by comparing visible structures” (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 246), is eclipsed by the mode of being in modernity, in which all the parts of an organism are subordinated to an invisible function. Biological life is torn away from the materiality of the living body and reconstituted as a system of functions. In his analysis of the work of Georges Cuvier, a French naturalist credited with creating modern comparative anatomy, Foucault writes: “[to classify] will mean...to relate the visible, to the invisible, to its deeper cause, as it were, then to rise upwards once more from that hidden architecture towards the more obvious signs displayed on the surfaces of bodies” (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 249). This invisible cause is, of course, the organism’s *telos*. Anatomical functions become interpreted in terms of their importance for meeting the needs of the life of the organism. The body becomes biologically determined by the goal of sustaining life. “Life” becomes the organizing principle for imparting a normative value to the anatomical parts of the living being by the natural scientist. As Foucault points out in his reading of Cuvier:

Among insects, for example, the location of the antennae has no distinctive value because it is not in correlation with any of the main internal structures; the form of the lower jaw, on the other hand, can play a leading role in arranging them according to their resemblances and differences; for it is connected with the insect’s food and digestion, and thus with its essential functions: ‘the organs of mastication must be related to those of digestion, consequently to the whole mode of life, and consequently to the whole organic structure.’ (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 294)

The organism is now controlled by an entire system of hierarchical relationships that link the inner principle of its functionality with “the conditions of existence.”

The living being is simultaneously cut off from its body, and as a consequence of the interrelatedness of its anatomical parts, the body is placed in a continuous relation with the surrounding environment that ensures the normal functioning of the system.

The living being, by the action and sovereignty of the same force that keeps it in discontinuity with itself, finds itself subjected to a continuous relation with all that surrounds it. In order that the living being can live, there must exist several functional structures, all irreducible one to another, and also an uninterrupted movement between each one of those structures and the air it breathes, the water it drinks, the food it absorbs. Breaking the old Classical continuity of being and nature, the divided force of life will reveal forms that are scattered, yet all linked to the conditions of existence. (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 298)

In the modern *episteme*, the living being is split between the internal anatomical relations that determine its biological functions, and the environment in which it lives. And “both these spaces are subject to a common control: it is no longer that of the possibilities of being, it is that of the conditions of life” (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 299). As a result of its attachment to the biological goal of life, the environment also becomes subject to the inner metaphysical principle, and it is imbued with a normative meaning that exceeds its technical significance. In what follows, I will now show how Malabou deconstructs this hegemonic order imposed onto both life and its surroundings.

## **Ecological Resistance**

In this concluding section, I first consider Malabou's deconstruction of biopolitics in “One Life Only: Biological Resistance, Political Resistance.” I then turn to her explosive remarks on ecology in the conclusion to *Stop Thief!*. The confrontation between Malabou and Foucault will help me draw out the implications of her deconstruction of ecology and her concept of the non-governable for eco-anarchism today.

In contrast to Foucault, for whom biology is merely a vehicle for modern sovereignty, Malabou affirms the biological as a site of resistance to governmentality. Malabou's critique of Foucault is that his conception of the biological is not in fact biological. For Foucault, there is no need to engage with contemporary biological concepts if, as he puts it in *The Order of Things*, "Cuvier's work dominates from afar what was to be the future of biology" (FOUCAULT, 2002, p. 299). However, by ignoring biology, Malabou argues, Foucault dismisses precisely that which is supposed to be the concern of his analysis, namely, the body, and he ends up reinforcing the anti-biological bias of philosophy (MALABOU, 2022, p. 229). Malabou writes,

according to Foucault, all 'biological concepts' have a 'comprehensive, transferable character' by which they exceed their technical significance and take on a normative meaning (1994: 35). Yet the political becoming of biological concepts moves in only one direction: the control and regulation of both individuals and populations. Apparently, there cannot be any *biopolitical* resistance to the *biopolitical*. (MALABOU, 2022, p. 228)

Biopolitics reveals, as Malabou puts it, "the definitive erasure of the limit between the political subject and the living subjects" (MALABOU, 2022, p. 227). And yet, in no way does Foucault deconstruct the normative meaning that exceeds, modifies, and controls the biological; rather, in Malabou's words, "the biological is deprived of the right to respond and appears to flow and simply into the mould of power" (MALABOU, 2022, p. 228). The resistance of the biological is what philosophy fails to think. This is fatal, since Malabou's radical thought is precisely that the resistance to biopower "might emerge from possibilities written into the structure of the living being itself, not from the philosophical concepts that tower over it" (MALABOU, 2022, p. 227). For Malabou, contemporary biological concepts such as epigenetics and cloning call into question the archeo-teleological domination of life that biologically determine the body as a system of functions and normalize the subject as a coherent homogenous identity.

In *Stop Thief!*, Malabou writes that ecology has a double meaning today: "the discourse of the abode" and the non-governability of the Earth. She puts the problem with ecology today in the following terms:

Who's paying attention now to the fact that the word "ecology" also derives from *oikos*, house, even though it also refers to an entirely different thing – specifically home economics? Who's paying attention to the fact that "ecology" is a "discourse of the abode" battling against domestication? The Earth is a Habitat without domesticity, without master or center, absolutely non-governable, yet devastated by power games. (MALABOU, 2023, p. 219)

The apparent irreversibility in the command of eco-governmentality over the environment has its origin in the law of the home: "the dissymmetry and irreversibility of ruling and obeying finds its first structure in domesticity. In the end, it is domesticity that imposes its form on the concept of governing body – a ruling that then becomes difficult to rigorously separate from "natural" domination" (MALABOU, 2023, p. 35). Which is to say ecology is everywhere governed and devastated by the prolongation of sovereignty, by the "*archē despotikē* – the domination of father over wife and children, master over slaves" (MALABOU, 2023, p. 12). But ecology is also an absolute stranger to this rule. The explosive region of the Earth that "governing can neither reach nor manage" is what Malabou calls the non-governable. Malabou's notion of the non-governable does not name an act of resistance to government; (as Foucault shows, resistance is always married to the power it rises against.) The non-governable denotes the impossibility of government. As Malabou puts it: "The non-governable is neither the opposite, nor a contradiction, of the logic of government. It is other. The other *to* (not *of*) government. The mark of its impossibility" (MALABOU, 2023, p. 23).

Ecological life is everywhere a volatile and contradictory site that both exceeds and deconstructs itself by the simple nature of its incapacity to flow into the mould of power:

An animal is never governed, whatever method is employed. An animal is dominated. Even the most gentle, loving taming is domination... like the animal, the non-governable is that which can only be dominated, never governed. A dog only obeys through training, and in this sense the dog remains non-governable. (MALABOU, 2023, p. 139)

To affirm the non-governability of nature is to think the environment without recourse to the *archē*, to think politics without the aid of hegemony. Eco-governmentality papers over the fact

that “there is something within that is an absolute stranger to hierarchical order. This “something” within is life – nothing less than life itself” (MALABOU, 2023, p. 139). To acknowledge that nature is a stranger to governability, is to situate the natural environment itself as a site of resistance to the hegemonic order devastating the ecological world today.

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