The question of pleasure, so central to Michel Foucault’s work on power relations, has been skirted by those who have developed his inchoate remarks on biopower for an understanding of our contemporary political situation. There is plenty of pain and injustice but very little pleasure in the critiques elaborated by philosophers—I’m thinking primarily of Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno—whose nationality tends to be associated, at least in the Anglo-American imagination, precisely with pleasure. One way of framing the question that guides this essay would be to wonder why the Italians seem to have forgotten about the pleasurable side of life (the pleasures of bíos as well as of zoê). Is it really the case that pleasure—whatever we take it to be—remains negligible in biopolitics? Why does pleasure appear as superficial or politically unserious by comparison with other issues? After all, one of Foucault’s major insights was that pleasure is not antithetical to power but inextricable from it. The “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure” that he diagrams in La volonté de savoir make not only resistance
but also pleasure an indispensable part of the mechanism of power’s operations. I want to begin by suggesting that biopolitical theory has neglected the problematic of pleasure not because it is superficial or straightforward but, on the contrary, because it is so difficult.

Foucault was the first to admit this difficulty. In an interview from 1982, conducted while he was completing work on the later volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, he comments: “I think that pleasure is a very difficult behavior. It’s not as simple as that to enjoy one’s self. [Laughs] And I must say that’s my dream. I would like and I hope I’ll die of an overdose of pleasure of any kind. [Laughs] Because I think it’s really difficult, and I always have the feeling that I do not feel the pleasure, the complete total pleasure, and, for me, it’s related to death.” What one might have imagined as facile and unproblematic—our experience of pleasure—turns out to be a source of considerable difficulty. Yet in order to grasp these sentences, we must resist the temptation to read them biographically. The relevance of his remarks exceeds Foucault’s own psychology; indeed, by inferring that pleasure transports us beyond the subject of pleasure, they exceed any psychology (this may be why Foucault is laughing). One of the uses of pleasure—albeit not one discussed in his book of that title—would be to serve the cause of self-extinction, understood less as a fatality than as an escape from the prison house of identity. Going beyond identity necessarily takes us beyond the coordinates of individual psychology or biography.

It is worth noting that, in this interview conducted in English, Foucault refers to pleasure as a “behavior” rather than as an affect or a principle. The slightly odd locution (wouldn’t pleasure be better conceived as one possible outcome of behavior?) comports with the emphasis of his work on practices over and against essences, representations, or identities. Yet the difficulty of pleasure, as Foucault characterizes it in this interview, directly contrasts with what makes pleasurable behavior difficult in *The Use of Pleasure*. If, in those texts of late antiquity that Foucault studied for the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, the challenge was to master one’s uses of aphrodisia by way of various techniques of moderation, in this interview the challenge appears opposite—namely, to intensify pleasure to the point where it overwhelms the self. The distinction is not between mastering pleasure or being mastered by it, but rather between different ways of cultivating pleasure, neither of which is anywhere near as easy as enjoying a meal or getting laid. Since Foucault is not talking here about sexual pleasure—or, indeed, about genital pleasure as a model for bodily pleasure—the distinction between moderating and intensifying pleasure is
complicated by a notion of pleasure that exceeds sexual satisfaction. When, a few moments later in the interview, he observes that “[a] pleasure must be something incredibly intense,” Foucault gestures toward a practice of pleasure whose difficulty lies in its resistance to satisfaction. This is the difficulty not of what hankers after satisfaction without achieving it but of what pushes beyond the limit that satisfaction typically designates.

It may seem as though, in abjuring the temptation to psychologize, we have ventured onto psychoanalytic territory. Certainly it would be easy to describe this pleasure-beyond-satisfaction in terms of the death drive; Foucault’s interview comment that “for me, it’s related to death” seems to point in that direction too. Yet I think it’s worth tarrying for a while outside a psychoanalytic orbit in order to follow where Foucault’s line of thinking about pleasure leads. Invoking the death drive risks resolving the problem-atic of pleasure prematurely. One of the real limitations of queer theory is that, although inspired by the first volume of Foucault’s History of Sexuality, it has tended to reduce the notion of “bodies and pleasures” to questions of specifically sexual pleasure, on one hand, or the death drive, on the other. Far from a stable category in Foucault’s thought, pleasure nevertheless remains irreducible to the terms of either “sex” or “drive.” The burden of La volonté de savoir was that sex is not the solution—even if pleasure might be. Hence the well-known opposition between “sex-desire” and “bodies and pleasures” with which Foucault concludes his polemic: “It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grip of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibilities of resistance. The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire but bodies and pleasures.”

The familiarity of Foucault’s argument here should not obscure how counterintuitive it actually is, since his titrating of pleasure from the sex-desire nexus involves a precarious segregation between our understanding of pleasure and our experiences of sex. He is insisting that we relinquish fucking and orgasm as paradigms for pleasure. Or, as he puts it in another late interview, “The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure as the root of all our possible pleasure—I think that’s something quite wrong.” Reducing bodily pleasure to sexual pleasure serves to corral it within a scientia sexualis, where it once again becomes an index of truth and hence a means of regulation. For Foucault the appeal of pleasure is that, insofar as it lacks the psychological depth attributed to desire,
pleasure malfunctions as a reliable sign of subjective truth and thus interrupts the smooth deployment of regulatory power. Desexualizing pleasure defamiliarizes it. This is the upside, politically speaking, to the epistemologically dismaying implication of the sentence I’ve taken as this paper’s epigraph (“pleasure—nobody knows what it is!”), in which Foucault suggests that the modern, Western emphasis on deciphering desire has produced an ignorance about pleasure. The point would not be to remedy this ignorance by means of a science of pleasure but rather to leverage it against established regimes of power-knowledge. Pleasure’s opacity represents both a problem and, from a different vantage, a tactical solution.

Of course, the notion of a political solution is one of the persistent chimeras that Foucault’s redescriptions of power aimed to displace (much to the annoyance of readers seeking blueprints for action). Insofar as pleasure countermands the claims of identity, Foucault is justified in differentiating it from sex. Yet if pleasure resists knowledge, it does not thereby unequivocally resist power. On the contrary, Foucault’s critique of the repressive hypothesis argues that nineteenth-century power relations, far from functioning simply to negate and circumscribe pleasure, in fact worked in concert with it, such that power and pleasure amplified each other. “There was undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and an extension of the domain controlled,” he says of this new form of power, “but also a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure.” In order to register the import of what he is describing—as well as its implications for biopolitics—we need to appreciate how “a gain of pleasure” (bénéfice de plaisir) accrues not only to those who exercise power but also to those who are its targets. Here is the crucial passage:

The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. Capture and seduction, confrontation and mutual reinforcement: parents and children, adults and adolescents, educator and students, doctors and patients, the psychiatrist with his hysteric and his perverts, all have played this game continually since the nineteenth century. These attractions, these evasions, these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but perpetual spirals of power and pleasure.
In this description of what might be called an erotics of discipline, we glimpse the model of power relations advanced one year earlier, in *Discipline and Punish*, already morphing into something else. While it is not hard to imagine how pleasure accompanies both the exercise of power and the resistance to that exercise, the prospect of a “power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing” is more counterintuitive. If Foucault revealed power as operative even where we least expect it (“power is everywhere”), then he also suggested how opportunities for pleasure emerge unexpectedly too. The mobility and diffusion of modern power relations do not circumscribe but instead proliferate pleasures.

It is not clear that this aspect of Foucault’s argument has been fully grasped. We have registered the diffusion of power beyond heads of state and institutions, and we have imagined possibilities for resistance to new forms of power in the contemporary world. But we have found it much harder to see proliferating possibilities for pleasure—or to imagine those pleasures as valid. I think that Foucault means it when he refers to “perpetual spirals of power and pleasure,” even if what he means remains opaque. It is to our detriment that we remain skeptical about pleasures that we regard as contaminated by power, as if it were impossible to distinguish such pleasures from exploitation or abuse. Foucault is suggesting that there are no pleasures that are not contaminated by power—and therefore that we’re mistaken to think in terms of contamination, as if there were some pure pleasure exterior to and independent of power relations.

When we contemplate the prospect of not just power but also pleasure in the hierarchical relationships that Foucault invokes—between parents and children, teachers and students, doctors and patients, psychiatrists and hysteric—we inevitably worry about pleasure being obtained at the less powerful person’s expense. We think that pleasure is a zero-sum game and that it must have a victim. The structure of the spiral, in which power and pleasure are interwoven, is meant to challenge this assumption of a zero-sum game. Yet if pleasure appears as exploitative or illegitimate, then it hardly seems like something we should cultivate or embrace. From this vantage, pleasure looks pathological and deserves to be called by a different, less positive name. Here we witness a version of the conjuring trick that makes pleasure vanish, in this case by unmasking it as immoral or unethical. The conviction that pleasure tends to be taken at the expense of society’s less powerful members has animated various feminist critiques, for example, which demystify pleasure as a prerogative of specifically masculine privilege. This position was stated most baldly by Laura Mulvey when, in her
canonical essay on visual pleasure, she remarked, “It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article.”

Although feminism and film theory have moved beyond this position in the decades since Mulvey’s intervention, the impulse to demystify pleasure has not significantly abated. Perpetually vulnerable in certain of its manifestations to demystification or critique, pleasure has been a perennial target of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Often it seems as though the politics of pleasure is that it simply should cease. For example, the way in which the economics of postmodern capital exploits us by exploiting our capacity for pleasure (not merely our capacity for work or sublimation) has provoked intense skepticism from within the Marxist tradition about pleasure’s political status. The Frankfurt School’s critique of the modern culture industry shows how, as a mass soporific, capitalized pleasures function as a political distraction. “How do you distinguish,” Fredric Jameson cogently asks, “between real pleasure and mere diversion—the degradation of free time into that very different commodity called ‘leisure’, the form of commodity consumption stamped on the most intimate former pleasures from sexuality to reading?” As with the feminist critique, the political imperative here entails differentiating valid pleasures from their false or exploitative forms. False pleasure—perhaps an unexamined cognate of false consciousness—is pleasure that can be demystified as gratification obtained at our expense, whether by the dominant gender, the ruling class, or the hegemonic economic system.

False Pleasures?

Whether as illegitimate (exploitative) or erroneous (illusory), the notion of false pleasure paradoxically has inspired more critical commentary than its authentic, uncomplicated counterpart. To take pleasure seriously has tended to mean refusing to take it at face value. Yet it is what Foucault regarded as pleasure’s irreducible superficiality, its resistance to psychological depth, that drew him to the topic in the first place. Philosopher Arnold I. Davidson elaborates this point in his fine discussion of pleasure in Foucault’s work:

Although we have no difficulty talking about and understanding the distinction between true and false desires, the idea of true and false pleasures (and Foucault understood this point even if he never put it in exactly this way) is conceptually misplaced. Pleasure is, as it were, exhausted by its surface; it
can be intensified, increased, its qualities modified, but it does not have the psychological depth of desire. It is, so to speak, related to itself and not to something else that it expresses, either truly or falsely. There is no coherent conceptual space for the science of sexuality to attach itself to pleasure, and no primacy of the psychological subject in the experience of pleasure. Structures of desire lead to forms of sexual orientation, kinds of subjectivity; different pleasures do not imply orientation at all, require no theory of subjectivity or identity formation.

This synopsis encapsulates what for Foucault was the strategic value of pleasure over desire; but it does not reckon with the recurring impulse, stemming from the hermeneutics of suspicion, to demystify pleasure as a sign of something beyond itself or, indeed, to pronounce many ostensible pleasures as false. If, from a Foucauldian perspective, the distinction between true and false pleasures makes little sense, then perhaps a supplementary category or term is necessary to explain what appears as pleasure’s troubling capacity for propagating corrupt versions of itself.

This supplementary category is that of jouissance, the virus that deforms pleasure from within. Since the term jouissance is so closely associated with French psychoanalysis, it is not one that Foucault employs. Jouissance is what you get when you take pleasure beyond the pleasure principle; closer to an antonym than a synonym for pleasure, it is in fact the term through which Jacques Lacan redescribes the death drive. Having reached this point in spite of our detour and deferral, we might wonder what’s at stake in supplementing Foucault’s account of pleasure with this psychoanalytic concept, especially given that it was the psychoanalytic theory of desire that he was trying to think beyond. What seems nonetheless useful about the category of jouissance in this context is that it illuminates the lingering conviction that mixing pleasure with power is a recipe for exploitation. As a noxious pleasure, jouissance betokens someone else’s gratification at my expense. This foreign term—foreign both to Foucault’s thought and to the Anglo-American tradition that has no adequate translation for it—thus helps to account for persistent suspicions that pleasure remains incompatible with either moral virtue or progressive social change.

In a meditation on excess, the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips gets at this problem in vernacular terms by observing that “the person who haunts us is the person who is having more pleasure than us.” Thinking about pleasure, whether conceptually or subjectively, is vexed by what exceeds it. The persistent fantasy that someone somewhere is having more
fun than me (and probably without paying for it) animates more domains of our psychic and social life than we’re usually willing to concede. On one hand, we do our best to acknowledge the appalling realities of exploitation and abuse that seem to proliferate in the contemporary world, while, on the other hand, we harbor fantasies about the noxious jouissance of the other, seething with resentment at those we imagine to be having a better time of it all than we feel ourselves to be. Unfortunately, however, separating the fantasy dimensions of pleasure from the realities may be tougher than we realize. This is why—as Slavoj Žižek, the most jovial of our hermeneuts of suspicion, never tires of elaborating—jouissance is not merely personal or subjective but also vitally social and political.

No critic has done more than Žižek to demonstrate how “enjoyment” (as he translates it) motivates ideological dynamics. We might say that, in so doing, he has produced his own version of Foucault’s “spirals of power and pleasure.” My reservation about the Žižekian method, however, is that it too tends to make pleasure disappear—by repeatedly converting pleasure into jouissance. This vanishing act is not a by-product of Žižek’s magnificent machine but one of its central operations. By aligning Lacanian plus-de-jouir with Marxian surplus value, Žižek makes pleasure constantly shade into its excess; what we know about the mechanisms of capital lends credence to the idea that there is no pleasure that is not always already in surplus of itself. Thus, in Žižek’s world, no sooner do we have a moment with the pleasure principle than we’re beyond it, trucking with the death drive. In this way, defined by excess or rendered as constitutively too much, pleasure quickly evaporates.

Such a perspective assumes ahead of time how much is too much and, indeed, that enough is never simply enough. Sometimes, however, one wants to insist that the pleasures of a good cigar are just that—neither signs of a hankering for fellatio nor a confirmed seat on the death drive. For Žižek the Foucauldian strategy of intensifying pleasure can lead only to jouissance; but that assumption betrays overconfidence about how much pleasure a body or system can handle before turning pathogenic. It is, in fact, impossible to adjudicate how much pleasure is too much without a highly normative sense of what the human body is and what its capacities are. What may seem like way too much to you (“how can you possibly take all that up your butt?”) may not be too much for me—and vice versa. The assumption that certain pleasures are excessive or death driven tends to emerge when the pleasures in question are those of which one secretly disapproves (for instance, nonnormative sex). Often a cryptonormativism,
rather than ethics or politics, motivates the diagnosis of jouissance and its accompanying critical demystifications.

This problem is not resolved by moving into the dispassionate realm of empirical science. For, contrary to Davidson’s claim that “there is no coherent conceptual space for the science of sexuality to attach itself to pleasure,” experimental psychology has been investigating the question of pleasure for some time. Among its striking discoveries is that it is impossible for us to know who is having more pleasure—or even to know reliably when I myself am having more pleasure than I had on a previous occasion. Through a range of empirical cases and meticulous argumentation, Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert has shown how pleasure appears as an aspect of one’s own experience that one finds toughest to judge accurately (“These experiments tell us that the experiences of our former selves are sometimes as opaque to us as the experiences of other people”). How much more challenging must it be, then, to assess with any degree of reliability who is having more pleasure than I am. And yet the difficulties of measuring pleasure, far from exorcising the haunting figure that we credit with unimpeded access to it, only intensify our suspicions in this regard.

When we indulge the fantasy of greater pleasure elsewhere—whether we take it to reside in different social groups, other sexual practices, or our own future—we overlook the multiplicity of our own pleasures in the here and now. Our habits of thinking exhibit a marked propensity for making pleasure disappear or allowing it to manifest only somewhere else. The various hermeneutics of suspicion I’ve been sketching, in their feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic guises, are not wrong to question dominant forms of pleasure; but they have made it harder for us to embrace, much less intensify, the pleasures we have, especially when those pleasures are palpably imbricated with power relations. Insofar as the concept of biopower has been developed by a certain Marxist tradition, the repertoire of vanishing tricks performed on pleasure helps us to see how Foucault’s “spirals of power and pleasure” may have gotten lost in subsequent accounts of power. There is one additional critique of pleasure—Gilles Deleuze’s—that also needs to be considered and clarified before we can appreciate how the Foucauldian account has been transformed in recent biopolitical theory, particularly that of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

“I can scarcely tolerate the word pleasure,” claims Deleuze in a brief meditation on Foucault’s work. By way of explanation he adds, “Pleasure seems to me to be the only means for a person or a subject to ‘find itself again’ in a process that surpasses it.” Marking his difference from Fou-
cault, Deleuze declared a theoretic and political antipathy to the notion of pleasure, which for him implied a recentering and, indeed, reinstatement, of the psychological subject that his notion of desire aspired to disband. Pleasure “is a reterritorialization,” he concludes.18 (Or, as Phillips puts it, “pleasures are echoes”—repetitions of the same that tend to forestall difference, movement, or change.19) For his part, Foucault expressed an aversion to Deleuze’s emphasis on the primacy of desire—“I cannot bear the word desire”—even if his allergic reaction stemmed primarily from the deployment of this term in psychoanalysis rather than in Deleuze’s thinking.20 Desire was too bound up with repression, lack, and the hermeneutics of subjectivity to be viable for Foucault. Yet, according to Deleuze’s account of their exchange, Foucault also intuited that “what I call pleasure is perhaps what you call desire.”21 This is a crucial insight. It is not so much that the same concept goes under different names—desire in Deleuze, pleasure in Foucault—but rather that both philosophers were seeking a vocabulary to describe those forces that militate against the lures of identity, lures that today we can recognize as specifically biopolitical.

No small measure of the terminological confusion stems from how both Deleuze and Foucault are trying to develop ostensibly psychoanalytic vocabularies of pleasure and desire outside the jurisdiction of psychoanalysis. Quite understandably, they want to use terms associated with Lacan (désir) and Freud (plaisir as the standard French translation of Freud’s Lust) without the conceptual or institutional baggage that generally accompanies those terms—and, in Foucault’s case, without directly engaging psychoanalysis. This may be one reason for the latter’s return, in subsequent volumes of The History of Sexuality, to a thoroughly prepyschoanalytic era. If part of the difficulty of pleasure lies in treating it wholly apart from the Freudian notion of a pleasure principle, then that might account for Foucault’s emphasis on the pragmatics of pleasure—its uses, the practices associated with it, and its status as a form of “behavior.” But what is crucial about Foucault’s insight in the exchange with Deleuze is that it points to a division within the category of pleasure itself between self-confirming and self-dismissing tendencies. Whereas Deleuze hears in the term pleasure only its reterritorializing echoes, Foucault registers pleasure’s underacknowledged capacity to also deterritorialize or take flight. This distinction is elided in Lacan’s—and subsequently Roland Barthes’s—counterposing of pleasure to jouissance, with its implication that only jouissance has the potential to center the subject.22 Another way of putting it would be to say that whereas Lacan made a number of fine distinctions among phenomena that
lie beyond the pleasure principle, Foucault’s distinctions focused on the near side, in that zone of historical experience where pleasures may not yet exhibit the regularity or coherence of a principle.

The distinction between self-confirming and self-dismissing pleasures helps to explain those various instances of skepticism concerning pleasure’s political viability that I’ve outlined. For example, it is the self-regarding pleasures of mastering the other through sexual use—the assumption that others should serve primarily as sources of self-gratification for the pleasure-seeking subject—that provokes feminist resistance to normative pleasures, whether in mainstream cultural representations or everyday practice. This model of social relations based on commodity consumption likewise provokes Marxist doubts about pleasure. However, the essentially narcissistic pleasures of self-affirmation or identity affirmation are undermined by those austere, self-denuding pleasures that, by exposing one to forms of alterity that defeat self-recognition, inhibit appropriative selfhood, along with its logic of consumption. It is this more difficult dimension of pleasure that Foucault invokes in his initial preface to *The Use of Pleasure* when he remarks, “it would probably not be worth the trouble of making books if they failed to teach the author something he had not known before, if they did not lead to unforeseen places, and if they did not disperse one toward a strange and new relation with himself. The pain and pleasure of the book is to be an experience.”

Work that takes its author to an unexpected place, where he is no longer himself, confers a dislocating pleasure that remains quite distinct from the conventionally narcissistic pleasure of authorship (in which the work reflects its author’s ideal image of himself).

“My Name Is Legion”

The significance of what I’m calling self-dislocating pleasures lies in their resistance to formations of power that depend on—and, indeed, produce—identities. To observe that these formations of power are specifically biopolitical is to confront directly the question of where and how power takes hold of life, that is, by what mechanisms it penetrates the vital sphere. Given how most contemporary theorists of the biopolitical overlook the domain of sex and sexuality in their analyses, it is worth recalling that Foucault introduces his notion of biopower at the end of the introductory volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Yet critical interest in biopower picked up only after the publication, in 1997, of “Society Must Be Defended,” Foucault’s course of lectures at the Collège de France in 1976, even though the final
lecture, on March 17, 1976, repeats almost verbatim much of the final section of *La volonté de savoir* (which saw print a few months later, in October 1976).24 Somehow Foucault’s remarks about biopower needed a context other than that of sexuality to really fire the critical-political imagination. From my perspective, however, reframing the question of biopower in the context of his insights about pleasure makes clear what has been missed not only by his successors but also by Foucault himself.

If, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault aimed to displace centralized, juridical conceptions of power with a disciplinary model that emphasized power’s social and institutional dispersion, then barely a year later he was supplementing the disciplinary model with a regulatory one by means of the notion of biopower. His point of contrast, in the final section of *La volonté de savoir*, is less juridical power than sovereign power, understood in terms of the right to kill or let live. Beginning in the eighteenth century, Foucault claims, “the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death.”25 The symmetry of Foucault’s formulation—sovereign power is the right to take life or let live, whereas biopower is the right to make live or let die—doubtless accounts for part of its appeal. The elegance of this conceptual symmetry is only enhanced by the scalar distinction between the anatomo-politics of the individual human body (as described by the disciplinary model) and the biopolitics of whole populations (as described by the regulatory model), “in which bodies are replaced by general biological processes.”26 Foucault schematizes this set of distinctions as two series in his lecture of March 17, 1976:

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<td>body—organism—discipline—</td>
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<td>processes—regulatory</td>
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The significance of sexuality, in this context, is that it “represents the precise point where the disciplinary and the regulatory, the body and the population, are articulated.”28 Yet, despite the fact that it stands poised at the intersection of these two series, sexuality—and with it pleasure—has dropped out of subsequent accounts of biopower, including Foucault’s own. Thus, while he tracked the history of sexuality back to ancient Greece and Rome, Foucault pursued the question of biopower separately, in terms of the emergence of modern liberalism during the eighteenth century.29

To some extent, the focus on sexuality as a specifically biopolitical phenomenon has fallen victim to the neatness of Foucault’s paradigm, insofar as the division between micro and macro situates biopower too reso-
lutely on the side of population or mass effects. When we factor pleasure back into the picture, however, we start to see how biopower dissolves the individualized body of discipline not simply into the mass but also into the microcosms of tissue economies, multidirectional circulatory flows, and microbial life. In other words, Foucault’s distinction between individual anatomy and population (on which the distinction between disciplinary and regulatory power relies) obscures the subindividual microphysics of power and pleasure that he traced so compellingly in earlier sections of *La volonté de savoir*. There are not merely two scalar dimensions through which power interweaves human life—the microlevel of bodies and the macrolevel of populations—but at least three. The obscured level, that of molecularity, is what Foucault was gesturing toward when, in a skirmish with the Lacanians, he referred to the intriguing but undeveloped notion of the “sub-individual.” This notion is clarified in another interview from the same period when he explains, “What I want to show is how power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending even on the mediation of the subject’s own representations. If power takes hold on the body, this isn’t through its having first to be interiorized in people’s consciousnesses.” Distancing himself from the tradition of political theory that conceptualizes power in terms of ideology, Foucault rejects the Althusserian notion of interpellation precisely because it understands the political in terms of identification (or imaginary misrecognition). His point is not simply that identification is unnecessary for power’s bodily penetration but also that, by construing anatomy in imaginary terms, the very notion of identification maintains the illusion of the human body as a unity, when it is instead through its disunity, at the “subindividual” level, that power takes hold.

Formations of biopower partialize human bodies differently—more globally but also more intimately—than those of disciplinary power. What Nikolas Rose calls the molecularization of vitality has, as one of its consequences, the transformation of each and every body into a multitude. This is a way of saying that, in contrast to disciplinary power, biopolitical relations rely far less on subjective or social identities for their functioning. If Foucault’s account of discipline showed how we tend to act as if we believe in the political fictions of sexual and social identity, then his account of biopower discloses the human body itself as no less illusory than those other, more obviously fabricated fictions. The fiction of our bodies as self-contained unities, marked by sexual division but nonetheless individually bounded, is particularly intransigent because it grounds all other
identitarian illusions (this is the point of Lacan’s mirror stage). Philosopher Alphonso Lingis contributes toward demystifying this persistent illusion when he describes the microscopic hordes that swarm through human life:

Human animals live in symbiosis with thousands of species of anaerobic bacteria, six hundred species in our mouths that neutralize the toxins all plants produce to ward off their enemies, four hundred species in our intestines, without which we could not digest and absorb the food we ingest. . . . The number of microbes that colonize our bodies exceeds the number of cells in our bodies by up to a hundredfold. They replicate with their own DNA and RNA and not ours.34

Picturing what might be called an empire of human corporeality, Lingis suggests how the body is a multitude without being strictly populous.35 It is not a question of the human body miniaturizing the social body or simply replicating on a different scale the multitude about which Hardt and Negri write. Rather, it is a matter of recognizing—in the face of that most elementary self-recognition—how each and every ostensibly discrete human body contains multitudes or, put better, is multitudinous. The counter-recognition of radical bodily porousness, by registering our commonality and perpetual contact with others, enables vastly expanded possibilities for politics and for pleasure.

This is not as easy as it might sound. The task entails psychical as well as political struggle, since the two kinds of recognition involved—narcissistic self-recognition of the body as a unity versus political recognition of the body as a multitude—directly conflict. I would describe this conflict as the fundamental political antagonism. Making good on a politics of the multitude thus requires a thoroughgoing appreciation of how corporeal identitarianism—imaginary capture of the human body—persistently forecloses recognition of our bodies as always already multitudinous.36 Because multitude begins in the body’s libidinal networks, in their competing and incommensurable pleasures, identity represents one of the most insidious pathologies of power. And, it must be said, the notion of identity is no less insidious for being qualified, à la mode, as “multiple,” “strategic,” or “minoritarian.” Far from constituting an expression of subjectivity, identity is the ruse through which we negate subjectivity’s potential for change. Another way of putting this would be to insist that there are no political identities that are not in the end conservative, even if unwittingly. Hence, for much the same set of reasons that Foucault hates the word desire and Deleuze cannot stand pleasure, I loathe the term identity.
What the distinction between disciplinary and regulatory power usefully makes evident is that not all forms of power depend on categories of identity for their effective functioning. To the degree that biopower dissolves into larger aggregates those identity formations on which disciplinary power relies, there exists conflict as well as coordination between these modalities of power. By redescribing this Foucauldian problematic in terms of the multitude’s biopolitical production against empire, Hardt and Negri elaborate a notion of multitude that registers how resistance emanates from innumerable points that are not exterior to, but immanent within, biopower. In other words, the notion of biopower, by facilitating their redefinition of the Marxist project in terms of power rather than social class, has enabled the authors of Empire to perceive a greater potential for resistance, both actual and virtual, than would be possible in a strictly class-based analysis. Their multitude exceeds the working class and the impoverished, even as it includes them.

I find this understanding of power relations, with its robust account of resistance as immanent to power, markedly preferable to Agamben’s redescriptions of biopolitics, in which bare life offers zero resistance to the sovereign power that produces it through mechanisms of exception. In his attempt to revise Foucault, Agamben instead reverts to a pre-Foucauldian model that treats power relations as polarized between those who have all the power (the position of sovereignty) and those who have none (the position of homo sacer). One might venture that Agamben’s sovereign–bare life relation caricatures that of Hegel’s master–slave, were it not for the fact that the former hardly qualifies as a power relation in Foucault’s terms, owing to the extreme centrifugation that deprives one half of the couple of any leeway whatsoever. I suspect that the appeal of Agamben’s account, while ostensibly attributable to its utility in describing our post-9/11 political landscape, lies more fundamentally in its reassurance that we know where the power is because it has been so starkly consolidated. Homo Sacer permits us once more to believe in, and perhaps identify with, the reassuring idea of wholly innocent victims, those who have been divested utterly of power. Of course, it is possible to conceive of power in such an implausibly polarized manner only if one forgets about sexuality (not to mention pleasure), as Agamben manages to do in a book that begins with La volonté de savoir.

As I’ve tried to show, accounts of biopolitics that focus on power’s massification have scant means for explaining the microphysics of its functioning at the corporeal level. Speaking in terms of the multitude of the body (rather than a multitude of bodies) represents my effort to refocus
attention on the struggle of power relations at every level, including the molecular, and the effects of pleasure that accompany them. The deeper power’s corporeal penetration, the greater may be the bodily pleasures of resistance. By multiplying almost infinitely the sources of power and resistance, as well as by showing their mobility and dynamism, Foucault detotalizes power akin to how psychoanalysis—through its theory of the drives—detotalizes the human body. In this respect, my reservation about post-Foucauldian critiques of sovereignty stems from their tendency to retotalize power as something that, in its separateness from us, may be either a more locatable target of resistance or, conversely, an impossible foe thanks to its all-encompassing size and scale. In either case, power remains reassuringly external to the speaker.

By contrast, Foucault’s immanentist account of power takes the topological figure of the spiral as its model; this figure changes the terms through which relations among heterogeneous elements should be understood by emphasizing their mutual interdependence. The conceptual structure of Foucault’s “spirals of power and pleasure”—and this will be my final claim—may be drawn from the double helix of DNA. If so, then it would be the iconography of the life sciences, with its memorable image of intertwined chains representing the transfer of genetic information, that furnishes the philosopher of biopower with an ideal figure for conceptualizing how power takes hold of life at the “subindividual” or molecular level. Discovery of the double-helical structure of DNA, announced by James Watson and Francis Crick in 1953, revolutionized the field of molecular biology almost immediately; but it also rapidly captured the cultural imagination. Thanks to widely disseminated photographs of Watson and Crick’s three-dimensional, physical models of the double helix, the structure of DNA became available as a paradigm for conceptualizing relationships among other entities. It may even have represented for Foucault a nonstructuralist paradigm for thinking dynamic interrelationships.

Reflecting on Watson and Crick’s discovery in 1966, Georges Canguilhem suggested that it redefined biological life “as a meaning inscribed in matter.” Given his work’s influence on Foucault—not to mention that Canguilhem refers to The History of Madness and The Birth of the Clinic alongside Watson and Crick—it seems reasonable to assume that Foucault might have had the spirals of DNA in mind when he was formulating the vital interrelationship of power and pleasure. The double helix of DNA figures a radical immanentism that for Foucault betokened the inseparability of power and pleasure not only from each other but also from life. If, despite
his persistent preoccupation with *plaisir*, there can be no definitive answer to the question of what Foucault meant by the term—no possibility of pinning it down to a single meaning, function, or position—my argument has been that pleasure nevertheless needs to be thought together with, rather than independent of, the problematic of biopower. Pleasures that we barely know about lie at the heart of biopolitics.

Notes

9. Ibid., 45 (original emphases).
12. Fredric Jameson, “Pleasure: A Political Issue,” in *Formations of Pleasure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 3. The fact that this volume, dedicated to the question of pleasure and published seven years after the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, contains barely a single reference to Foucault’s account of pleasure in its dozen articles gives some indication of how hard it has been for the Anglo-American Marxist Left to come to terms with Foucault’s critique of power.

Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 49. On the evolutionary science of pleasure, see Paul Bloom's very interesting study (whose title probably would horrify Foucault), *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like* (New York: Norton, 2010). Contra Davidson, Bloom demonstrates at length how pleasure can be falsified, insofar as it depends on beliefs that can be revealed as mistaken, such as beliefs about the identity or gender of the person with whom you've just had sex (as in the phenomenon of the bed trick).

Although I have in mind the *Empire* trilogy throughout the latter portion of this paper, it would require another essay to do justice to either Hardt and Negri's intervention or the specifics of their engagement with Deleuze. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). My appreciation of the *Empire* project has been enhanced by the exchanges collected in Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).


Ibid., 190.


Quoted in Deleuze, “Desire and Pleasure,” 189.

Ibid., 189. Wendy Grace conveniently omits this point in her minutely researched but ultimately misguided account of what she calls the “radical divergence that separates Foucault and Deleuze when it comes to analyzing sexuality independent of psychoanalysis.” See Wendy Grace, “*Faux Amis*: Foucault and Deleuze on Sexuality and Desire,” *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (2009): 54.


Michel Foucault, “Preface to *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two,*” in *Essential Works*, vol. 1, 205. His ending the preface in this way recalls his remarks at the end of the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where he also famously described the “pleasure of writing” as identity canceling: “I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same.” Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 17.


Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 138 (original emphases). Compare the French
original: “On pourrait dire qu’au vieux droit de faire mourir ou de laisser vivre s’est substitué un pouvoir de faire vivre ou de rejeter dans la mort” (La volonté de savoir [Paris: Gallimard, 1976], 181). The fact that Foucault claims one power replaces the other, when in “Society Must Be Defended” he was more cautious and nuanced about their historical interrelationship (“I wouldn’t say exactly that sovereignty’s old right—to take life or let live—was replaced, but it came to be complemented by a new right which does not erase the old right but which does penetrate it, permeate it” [241]), suggests, at least to me, that the lecture of March 17, 1976, cribs from and modifies a text that already was composed, even if it would not see print for a further seven months.


Michel Foucault, “The History of Sexuality” (interview with Lucette Finas), in Power/Knowledge, 186.


Alphonso Lingis, Dangerous Emotions (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 27.

The distinction between a notion of the multitude and that of the people—which reaches back to the seventeenth-century disagreement between Spinoza and Hobbes over the sources of political authority—is laid out especially clearly in Paolo Virno, A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life, trans. Isabella Bertolletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 21–26. The distinction, with its accompanying argument, is developed in Paolo Virno, Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation, trans. Isabella Bertolletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), esp. 25–42.

What I’m getting at here is close to what Hardt and Negri describe as a radical biopotentiality of the flesh—“a kind of social flesh, a flesh that is not a body, a flesh that is common, living substance. We need to learn what this flesh can do. . . . The flesh of the multitude is pure potential, an unformed life force, and in this sense an element of social being, aimed constantly at the fullness of life” (Multitude, 192; emphasis added).

See Hardt and Negri, Multitude, esp. 93–95.


Here I differ from Judith Roof who, in *The Poetics of DNA* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), reads DNA as exemplifying a structuralist sense of structure and therefore as anathema to Foucault.