On June 12, 2013, a two-and-a-half minute amateur recording titled “Taksim’de Gaz saldırsının içinde kalan Kadının acı çığlıkları” was uploaded on YouTube. It shows what appears to be a sudden as well as massive tear gas assault being conducted against a large crowd gathered somewhere in the vicinity of Istanbul’s Taksim square, where people have been protesting against the planned demolition of Taksim Gezi Park since May.

This video, however, is striking in a number of ways. The speed at which the gas completely fills the whole area where the large crowd is assembled is astonishing. Forty seconds after the impact of the first cartridges, the sky is not visible anymore: a yellowish and dense smoke fills the entire frame of the image. Then, the camera turns its attention to a young woman nearby. Like the author of the video, she finds herself caught in the chemical cloud, on top of an immobilized bus, apparently unable to flee. The rudimentary respiratory mask she’s wearing over her mouth is clearly unable to protect her adequately in this situation. The incapacitating effects of the gas are dramatically illustrated by the acute distress she quickly finds herself in: the video shows her as she falls on her knees, screaming. The experience must be terrifying. In her precarious position, the only thing she could do to avoid breathing the gas would be not to breathe at all which, in turn, would mean death. As Sloterdijk once observed, her body is coerced into collaborating to its own demise. It has no choice but to interface with the chemical agent filling the atmosphere:

1 See this video online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rSlHCT3WRw
2 I am not the only one to have thought of Sloterdijk’s essay on gas warfare in relation to the use of tear gas against civilian populations. A year ago, NAJ Taylor, a doctoral researcher at the University of Queensland, wrote a good opinion piece for Al Jazeera about the increasing use of tear gas by law enforcement agencies: “Teargas: Or, the state as atmo-terrorist” (May 5, 2012). More recently, Jussi Parikka linked Sloterdijk’s essay to the ongoing Turkey protests in a short comment he published in his blog jussiparikka.net: “Breathless” (June 17, 2013). A more elaborated essay using Sloterdijk’s theory of “atmo-terrorism” was proposed by Marijn Nieuwenhuis in a text titled “Terror in the Air
Stills from a video of a tear gas attack by the Istanbul Police (June 2013, see footnote #1)
[...] the air attack of the gas terrorist (Gasterroristen) produces in the attacked the despair of being forced to cooperate in the extermination of their own lives, because they cannot not breathe.\textsuperscript{3}

The following exploratory essay mobilizes two main conceptual frameworks: for the most part, it borrows from Michel Foucault’s influential analysis of “biopolitics” and from Sloterdijk’s \textit{Spheres} project. The objective is to situate what is happening in the video in the broader perspective of the contemporary conditions of our coexistence. Its argument can be summarized in the following three propositions:

- First, the tear gas attack against the crowd of protestors is, in some ways, exemplary of a contemporary regime of governmentality concerned not only with mere subjects and bodies, but more broadly with the control of biological populations in a living environment. Here, Sloterdijk’s analysis of atmospheric warfare clearly intersects with Michel Foucault’s environmental biopolitics.

- Second, biopolitics is not strictly reducible to the intention of a sovereign power. Although it may at one point express itself through the institution of a State government, biopower cannot be monopolized nor possessed by a party in particular. It comes from human life in general and exists as a dynamic network of force relations. From this perspective, the video also raises the crucial problem of the conditions in which a form of life or a way of living could resist biopolitics.

- Third, the distress of the young woman dramatically points towards a limit where politics of life turn into politics over life. This is illustrative of the paradox of biopolitics already identified by Foucault where, most notably through wars, the political management of life turns into a work of death.

By further developing those three propositions it is possible to understand the tear gas attack depicted in the video as a specific kind of biopolitical operation situated in the broader context of modernity’s coexistential crisis. In such a perspective, the situation of the young woman caught in a cloud of irritant gas concerns us all. Not so much in the sense that we all share it in a consensual unity, but quite the opposite. It is ours in the aporetical sense that what we share is what Sloterdijk has described as an “acute world war of ways of life.”\textsuperscript{4} Living together has become the environment in which the political management of life takes place as the possibility of life’s own annihilation.

\textsuperscript{3} Peter Sloterdijk, \textit{Terror from the Air}, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009, 23.
Living Environment ///

In the video, it is clear that gas cartridges are being indistinctly thrown and/or fired into the crowd. They are not targeted at specific individuals nor, as a matter of fact, at any body in particular. Instead, the gas released by the cartridges is meant for the atmosphere associated with the space where the crowd is gathered at a certain point in time. It is through the temporary modification of the living environment that some generic characteristics of the human body are targeted for the specific purpose of control. Officially, the tear gas is not meant nor designed to be lethal. Instead, the gas reacts to body’s moisture and provokes irritation and burning sensations. It consequently forces the body to seek a more hospitable space and, in the process, to leave the position it is occupying.

Michel Foucault calls “biopolitics” the massifying capture of life by political power. It is neither sovereignty over subjects, nor discipline over individualized bodies. Instead, biopolitics designate the statistical control of populations through actions on their living environment. In other words, it concerns the control of “human beings insofar as they are a species and their environment.”

Subjects and bodies have not been abandoned as the locus of power, but rather integrated in a new form of control, of which the use of tear gas is exemplary. As a continuation of the gas warfare studied by Sloterdijk in *Terror From The Air*, the use of tear gas in the video especially brings attention to the shared quality of our biological living conditions:

> With the phenomenon of gas warfare, the fact of the living organism’s immersion in a breathable milieu arrives at the level of formal representation, bringing the climatic and atmospheric conditions pertaining to human life to a new level of explication.

Human beings’s ability to modify the atmospheric conditions in which they live does not stop with tear gas. The video is a reminder that biopolitics is both a technological and a global affair. It is not because we are all breathing tear gas — we are not — nor because the same tear gas cartridges are being used in Turkey and in Brazil. Rather, it is because of our collective ability to transform the conditions of our living environment at an unprecedented scale. Biopolitics

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5 Except of course when the cartridge itself is used as a projectile.
6 Foucault was not the first (nor the last) to elaborate a concept of “biopolitics.” For a solid overview of the history of the concept, see Roberto Esposito’s *Bíos*, Timothy Campbell (trans), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
8 Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, 23.
includes “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 means that human populations are neither strictly situated in Jakob von Uexküll’s *Umwelt* nor exactly in Martin Heidegger’s *In-der-Welt-sein* (Being-in-the-world). Instead, they inhabit an intermediate, constructed space which is precisely the object of Sloterdijk’s “spherology.” This space is neither as determined (closed) as the “environment” of animals, nor as indeterminate (open) as *Dasein*’s world.

The problem of managing those intermediate environments is notoriously illustrated by the contemporary debates surrounding the increase in greenhouse gas production. Smog-saturated skies, like those sometimes seen over Singapore and Beijing, show the limits of control where actions on the environment create undesirable side effects. From this perspective, the tear gas attack seen in the video is the spectacularly visible expression of a much larger problem.

**Power ///**

Whereas disciplinary technologies could in some circumstances be assigned to a well defined sovereign power, biological technologies of control are not necessarily centralized in any form of “state,” “government,” or “system.” Foucault was quite clear about his definition of “power”:

> By power, I do not mean “Power” as a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state. [...] Finally, I do not have in mind a general system of domination exerted by one group over another, a system whose effects, through successive derivations, pervade the entire social body. The analysis, made in terms of power, must not assume that sovereignty of the state, the form of the law, or the over-all unity of a domination are given at the outset; rather, they are only the terminal forms power takes.

This does not mean that the action of the Turkish government should not be scrutinized. There is in fact such a thing as a “State control of the biological,” as Foucault once put it. One has only to think about laws regarding stem cell research, abortion and birth control — China’s one-child policy being a striking example of the latter. The politically strategic decisions of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip

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10 For the relationship between Sloterdijk’s “spheres” and the concepts of environment and world, see Peter Sloterdijk, *La Domestication de l’être*, Paris: Mille et une nuit, 2000, 42-43, as well as “Foreword to the Theory of Spheres,” in Melik Ohanian and Jean-Christophe Royoux (eds), *Cosmograms*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005, 223-240.

Erdoğan certainly have a role to play in the tear gas attack captured by the amateur video described in the opening of this essay.

However, what Foucault is saying in regard to biopolitics and biopower is that power is not a circumscribed predicate one could assign to a single individual or a class of individuals. Nor is it a substance that one group could appropriate to the detriment of another group. “More power to the people” is a slogan not quite in line with Foucault’s theories. Within a biopolitical paradigm, “[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.” This distributed “network of power relations” forms “transitory points of resistance.” In Turkey, for example, localized tactics of climatization emerged in response to the strategy of tear gas warfare. What is important, it seems, is to be aware of the ways by which those fluxes of resistance are susceptible to institutional capture:

And it is undoubtedly the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships.

Giorgio Agamben — who prolonged Foucault’s efforts in new directions — has shown how the very institution of human rights is precisely what allows for the political management of human life in the first place:

Declarations of rights represent the originary figure of the inscription of natural life in the juridico-political order of the nation-state. The same bare life that in the ancien régime was politically neutral and belonged to God as creaturely life and in the classical world was (at least apparently) clearly distinguished as zoe from political life (bios) now fully enters into the structure of the state and even becomes the earthly foundation of the state’s legitimacy and sovereignty.

From this perspective, human rights belong to the genealogical background that eventually allowed for the emergence of tear gas warfare as a specific kind of biopolitical operation. In such a context, it is all the more important to keep thinking different forms of collec-

12 From Foucault’s perspective, it would seem appropriate to understand biopolitics as stabilized forms of governmentality (institutions, apparatuses, etc.), whereas biopower is the underlying “multiplicity of force relations” immanent to life upon which those stabilized forms emerge. For more, see also Maurizio Lazzarato, “From Biopower to Biopolitics,” Pli 13, 2002, 99-113.
13 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 93.
14 Ibid., 96.
15 Ibid., 96 (my emphasis).
tive life, aside from the institutional forms already provided by the massifying power of biopolitics. This opens up new lines of thought which are not based on “binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled,” or of “massive binary division.” Examples of such efforts can be found in Giorgio Agamben’s deployment of “whatever singularities” and Jean-Luc Nancy’s attempt to think the “singular plural.” Both authors are engaged in an attempt to think new political forms of life — for which they both use the term “community” — through dynamics of (force) relations rather than through predetermined sets of fixed properties or values.

War ///

One could argue that the gas attack shown in the video does not qualify as “warfare” since it shows the use of tear gas by law enforcement against civilians. It is true that while the military use of chemical weapons has been subjected to various international prohibitions since the Hague Conventions, the domestic use of tear gas for law enforcement purposes remains legal. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers “tear gas” to be a “riot control agent”: instead of a “chemical weapon” it is referred to as a “chemical compound.”

However, it could be argued that the term “warfare” in particular, and the category of war in general, nevertheless apply to what is happening in Turkey. They also apply, in fact, to similar events happening elsewhere, even when tear gas or military-style operations are not involved. There are several reasons for this, both practical and theoretical.

In August 2012, the independent organization Physicians for Human Rights issued a report titled “Weaponizing Tear Gas” about the “unprecedented use” of the control agent during the Bahraini uprising of spring 2011. The report clearly suggests that tear gas — to which PHR refers to as a “toxic chemical agent” — can be used as a weapon. Furthermore, the deputy prime minister of Turkey has threatened to deploy military forces in cities. If the army was indeed deployed against the civilian population, the conflict could very well qualify as a civil war. In fact, the threat alone is enough to link this conflict with the increasing extension of war zones inside the civilian sphere. Meanwhile, authorities in Brazil have announced the deployment of the National Public Security Force (Força Nacional de Segurança Pública). The NPSF is composed of men from the Brazilian Military Police. The very qualification of a police force responsible for public order as
being “military” in nature could be seen as another indication of the indifferientiation between public civil and military spheres.

Civilian conflicts are not a new phenomenon. Their history can be traced back to the Greek *stasis* which designated a violent confrontation between the civil members of a given *polis* (or city-state). In contemporary times however, globalization has increasingly folded the external into the internal: the traditional distinction between the domain of war — which used to take place at a macro level, in-between states (or state nations) — and the civilian sphere has been blurred. The turn towards what has been called a “global civil war” has intensified since 2001, when the launch of the so-called “war on terror” effectively extended the theatre of military operations to the entire world.

It is one of the strengths of Foucault’s analysis to show how, in present times, the politics of life are paradoxically always susceptible to being transformed into works of death. This situation has become possible because politics and war are but different strategies of coding the power of biopolitics: strategies where one is “always liable to switch into the other.” The most deadly conflicts of the last century have been carried in the name of safeguarding the integrity of life: the life of a population, a nation, a community:

> Wars are not longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital.

Furthermore, the events represented in the amateur video I wrote about earlier are far from being exceptional or, rather, they appear to be exceptionally familiar. I won’t be the first to recall Walter Benjamin’s comment to the effect that “the ‘emergency situation’ in which we live is the rule.” Civilian populations all around the world have been increasingly involved in incidents of extreme violence (although one needs to distinguish between an increase in the events themselves and an increase in media exposure). Wars, it could be argued, are now experienced at the micro level of various public and private spaces, whether they take the form of bombings, of targeted assassinations, of mass murders, of explosive riots or of uprisings. Since I started writing this text, and while the conflict in Turkey was still ongoing, massive protests have also erupted both in Brazil and Egypt.

In the first volume of his Spheres trilogy, Sloterdijk describes this situation as a “war of foams”:

19 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 93.

20 Ibid., 137.
The guiding morphological principle of the polyspheric world we inhabit is no longer the orb, but rather foam. [...] In foam worlds, the individual bubbles are not absorbed into a single, integrative hyper-orb, as in the metaphysical conception of the world, but rather drawn together to form irregular hills. [...] What is currently being confusedly proclaimed in all the media as the globalization of the world is, in morphological terms, the universalized war of foams.²¹

As soon as the protests started in Turkey, at the end of last May, efforts were made to unify them with previous social movements such as the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring. It is true that while each of those events are still being characterized locally, they do certainly profit, to a certain extent, from a global momentum.

However, one cannot deny that what is shared globally, aside from what could be called a “longing for belonging,” is also a mode of being-together dramatically characterized by violence. The hypothesis according to which the very desire for togetherness fuels to some extent those conflicts is certainly something worthy of further consideration. For the moment, it will suffice to note there may be a conceptual continuity between the ways in which Foucault, Sloterdijk, Nancy and others think of contemporary forms of political life through confrontations and wars.

A Valley of Tears ///

Renaissance humanism provided humanity with a position of superiority, not quite alongside God, but well above the earth: “in the middle of the world,” as Pico della Mirandola writes in his Discourse on the Dignity of Man. Modernity is often interpreted as the moment when this privileged position was lost, when human beings were thrown back among the entities they used to contemplate from above. This transformation comes with the realization that human life is not absolutely exceptional, but on the contrary that it is deeply embedded in a specific bio-technological environment which is both shaped by our very existence and shared with other species. The critical conditions of this “ecotechnological enframing,” as Jean-Luc Nancy once called it, have become strikingly visible on a daily basis.²²

What Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics has shown, among many other things, is that the operations to control and organize life do not happen in another realm, in the high tower of a dark castle. Instead, the network of power management trying for better or worse to provide life with an adequate form coincides all around the world with life itself: it is us, as a human community. Instead of being in the

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²¹ Sloterdijk, Spheres Volume I, 71.
middle of the world, we find ourselves to be the very *milieu* in which biopolitics take place. The aporia of our situation, as we have seen, becomes clear: not unlike the young woman caught in a cloud of tear gas, the very conditions for the existence of a “we” — *i.e.* coexistence — seem to imply its demise.

/// Published on August 26, 2013