

Building imperfect democracies.  
Conjectures on images of childhood, biopolitic *dispositifs*  
and pedagogical-didactic knowledge

*Costruire democrazie imperfette.  
Congetture su immagini d'infanzia, dispositifs biopolitici  
e saperi pedagogico-didattici*

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abstract

*This essay presents, within a broader research program, three sets of conjectures relating to the intertwining of childhood images, biopolitic dispositifs and pedagogic and educational research activities. In the first set of conjectures, some peculiarities of both the market and the democratic approaches to early childhood education are examined, and some characteristics of the possible images of the child and childhood are illustrated relating to the two approaches. The second set of conjectures shows, through a circumstantial reasoning, how the proposal of a democratic approach, which arises as a critical response to the market approach, potentially could contribute to the legitimisation of neoliberal biopolitical governmentality. Finally, the last set of conjectures indicates, although cautiously and for the purpose of illustration, one of the ways to escape biopolitical governmentality: rethinking the categories that inform politics and education in order to move towards the resolution of the schism between bare life and form-of-life.*

**Keywords:** *Biopolitic dispositifs, Childhood image, Early childhood education, Market approach, Participatory democracy, Bare life/form-of-life*

Il contributo presenta, nell'ambito di un più ampio programma di ricerca, tre insiemi di congetture relative all'intreccio tra immagini d'infanzia, dispositifs biopolitici e compiti della ricerca pedagogica e didattica. Nel primo insieme di congetture vengono analizzate alcune peculiarità dell'approccio di mercato e dell'approccio democratico all'*early childhood education* e vengono illustrati alcuni caratteri delle possibili im-

magini di bambino e d'infanzia relative ai due approcci. Il secondo insieme di ipotesi mostra, attraverso un ragionamento indiziario, come la proposta di un approccio democratico, che nasce in risposta critica a quello di mercato, potenzialmente potrebbe concorrere alla legittimazione della governamentalità biopolitica neoliberale. Infine, l'ultimo insieme di congetture indica, pur cautamente e solo a scopo esemplificativo, una delle possibili linee di fuga dalla governamentalità biopolitica: ripensare le categorie che informano la politica e l'educazione per avviarsi alla soluzione della scissione tra nuda vita e forma-di-vita.

**Parole chiave:** *dispositifs* biopolitici, immagine d'infanzia, early childhood education, approccio di mercato, democrazia partecipativa, nuda vita/forma-di-vita

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## Prologue<sup>1</sup>

Our goal is not to propose hypotheses corroborated on childhood images, biopolitic *dispositifs*<sup>2</sup> and tasks of pedagogical and educational research. We rather aim to show a research program by quickly outlining the main problems that it intends to tackle and some interpretative hypotheses. In particular, we present synthetically three sets of conjectures.

In the first, we imagine that in educational policies and practices of childcare services at least three approaches of a pedagogical, managerial and organizational type are to be found: the market, the democratic, and the familiar and libertarian. We will try to identify the peculiar characteristics of the first two and the relative images of the child and childhood.

In the second set of hypotheses, following a circumstantial reasoning, we will only try to *show* how the democratic approach may not represent a real alternative to the market approach, but potentially contributes to the legitimisation of the power mechanisms of the current biopolitical governmental form. To this end, we will examine very briefly some highly widespread educational techniques, and also pre-

- 1 The contents of this contribution express the thought of both authors. Elena Luciano authored the prologue, the first and the fourth paragraphs; Andrea Giacomantonio authored the second and third paragraphs.
- 2 The French term *dispositif* is translated with *dispositivo* in Italian and Spanish, with *apparatus*, *deployment* or *dispositive* in English. Here, in order to avoid ambiguity of meaning caused by the differing use [uses/usage] of the term, we will systematically use only the original solution: *dispositif*.

sent various services that adopt the *Reggio approach*, the historic figure of the democratic approach.

Last but not least, by means of the last class of conjectures, we will try, very cautiously and for purpose of illustration, to indicate one of the possible ways to escape from biopolitical governmentality: the resolution of the scission between bare life and form-of-life.

## 1. Childhood, market, democracy

Nowadays, among the different approaches that can be distinguished on the political-institutional, pedagogical-educational, management and organisational choices in childhood services (Luciano, 2017), one of the most recognisable at international level is the market approach (Moss, 2009). It is based on the rules of the market economy and on the themes of neoliberalism, of the knowledge economy and the marketisation of education, upbringing and training (Masschelein, Simons, 2002; Moss, 2009; Fielding, Moss, 2011). Consistent with this approach, the educational bodies operating in the first few years of an individual's life seem to prioritise the early development of their human capital in order to increase their productivity, competitiveness and performance on the one hand, and to ensure the stability and efficiency of the political, social and economic system on the other.

Within the market approach, by means of a technological educational system, in the context of educational services for childhood and schools, children are given priority in acquiring mastery of competencies and soft skills which make it possible to increase employability and the ability to actively exercise rights and responsibilities. With this approach, the child seems to be perceived mostly in his role of future adult, autonomous, flexible, self-regulated and capable, developing the implications of Dewey's thought, of ordering the means available to achieve certain ends in view. Consistent with this, his parent seems to be primarily regarded as a consumer of a school that presents itself as an economic organisation that competes in the educational market (Fielding, Moss, 2011) through the work of teacher-technicians engaged in mobilising human technologies (Rose, 1999).

One of the main effects of scholastic neoliberalism and globalisa-

tion is the introduction in early childhood education of the competition-efficiency logics typical of the global market, with emphasis placed on the definition of measurable quality standards, on skills, competences and individual merits, on competition in the educational offerings, with the idea of increasing efficiency and quality.

At the European level, the technical and efficiency-oriented aspects seem to have progressively taken over from the perspective of citizenship and its rights, becoming politics and, obviously, education politics.

For over twenty years, the European Union has been emphasising the need to invest in people, in order to organise the transition towards a competitive, dynamic, knowledge-based and sustainable economy, to promote employment, social inclusion and innovation (Santaniello, 2016).

The OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) has a leading role in the orchestration of the global knowledge network.

For example, since its first publication in 2000, the *Program for International Student Assessment* (PISA), promoted by the OECD, has collected empirical and comparable data in many countries to ascertain the levels of competence of students at the end of compulsory schooling. In 2016, the OECD expanded this assessment process to the preschool context and launched a new program to assess the learning outcomes of children in their early years of life, entitled *International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study* (IELS) (OECD, 2017). This program, which provides for standardised tests on various areas of development and learning in younger children, has sparked a critical international debate in the educational research field and childhood pedagogy (Moss *et al.*, 2016; Carr *et al.*, 2016; Urban and Swadener, 2016; Moss, Urban, 2017).

Within the framework of educational policies and services for children, it is now possible to recognize a perspective that questions the market approach and, in particular, its emphasis on technical proficiency, standardisation, managerialism and the processes of “schoolification” in contexts aimed at children, proposing a seemingly radical and democratic alternative.

Today, the public discourse assumes, to the extent it articulates its views on educational purpose, that education is about the accumulation of competencies and qualifications that will fit children for becoming flexible, self-regulating and risk-managing workers and citizens in a world made up of nation states competing in [a] global market economy driven by ever-increasing consumption and growth. We are individually and collectively, in need of ever higher standards of skill and education for future prosperity and well-being. It is assumed, a continuing trajectory of the present, more of the same (Fielding, Moss, 2011, p. 28).

The alternative proposed by the democratic approach in childcare services, raises instead an idea of interdisciplinary education, which rejects the principle of reduction in favour of the principle of complexity and whose purpose is survival (Aldrich, 2010) and development at the same time, that is the ability to live by taking care of the planet on the one hand, and promoting the well-being and development of the person on the other (Wright, 2010). It is about promoting an education aimed at survival and development, not unrelated to economic objectives as long as they are not exclusive: an education that is “understood as living well and within limits, a reminder that personal flourishing can not be divorced from collective, even species flourishing” (Fielding, Moss, 2011, p. 32).

In the proposal by Fielding and Moss (2011), in particular, the essence of radical democratic education is based on values such as cooperation and collegiality, where singularity and individuality are combined with solidarity and the close connection between democracy and participation, between care and education: it is about promoting schools or children services conceived as public spaces for citizens, as collective workshops to experience the irreducible plurality of possible educational values and practices, as a community of learning focused on people and on the promotion of diversity and participatory democracy.

In the perspective of democratic education, the very theme of the childhood image takes on an important space. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2003), for example, analyse how the different interpretations of children and childhood determine from time to time institutions

and educational practices addressed to children, and highlight that, thanks to the contribution of the image of the child produced in the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, it is possible to contrast the modernist ideal focused on the autonomous and stable subject, which fuels an image of a poor child (weak and passive, incapable and underdeveloped, dependent and isolated), and instead spread the idea of a rich and always intelligent child, coherent with the postmodern ideals of complexity, contradiction, difference, plurality and unpredictability.

The democratic approach, at least in some of its expressions, seems to prefer the image of the child spread by the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, a rich child, strong and powerful already at birth, so keen to feel part of the world to actively use a hundred languages and a complex network of relationships and maps of personal, interpersonal, social, cognitive, affective and symbolic orientation (Malaguzzi, 1995).

This is “a child born with great potential that can be expressed in a hundred languages; [...] a citizen with a place in society, a subject of rights which the society must respect and support” (Children in Europe, 2008, p. 6), a child who is characterized by an intense, vital desire to assume “a role of *protagonist* and of *original protagonist*” (Malaguzzi, 1978, p. 6).

## 2. *Infantia oeconomica*

The proposal of the democratic approach is of great interest, but our view is that, on the theoretical level, it needs to go further. Here we limit ourselves to *showing* how, on a conjectural level, the image of the child elaborated by *Reggio Children* and then widely propagated in various forms and discursive practices – which, it has been said, represents the historic figure in which the utopian proposal of the democratic approach is embodied – can contribute to the legitimisation and increase of the power of the same biopolitical governmentality of which the market approach is an expression.

Our circumstantial reasoning consists of three steps. In the first, we will try to indicate in a few words the main characteristics of the current neoliberal biopolitic *dispositifs*; in the second we will *show* the isomorphism that seems to exist between these *dispositifs* and the image

of childhood now widely recognized as “reggiana”; finally, in the third, we hypothesise how the proposal of the democratic approach does not represent a way to escape from the grip of this form of government.

Michel Foucault explicitly introduced the concept of *dispositif* in 1976, in *La volonté de savoir*. But he defined it only in a conversation in 1977 (Foucault, 2005). An excellent summary has been offered by Giorgio Agamben:

- a. It is a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and non linguistic under the same heading: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements.
- b. The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation.
- c. As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge (Agamben, 2009, pp. 3-4).

Since the fifteenth century these *dispositifs* have acted on every individual – child, adult or elderly, man or woman, free or detained, student or worker – a microphysical hold capable of generating anthropogenic processes (Foucault 1976a and 1984; Deleuze, 2010): in other words, the subject becomes the product of the meeting, sometimes conflictual, between the human being and *dispositifs* themselves. (Agamben, 2009). Movements, as could be seen, essential for political reasoning, pedagogy and teaching.

Foucault examined in depth the biopolitical nature of this form of government in three courses held at the Collège de France between 1976 and 1979: *Il faut défendre la société, Sécurité, territoire, population*, and *Naissance de la biopolitique*.

For a long time the sovereign exercised on each and every subject a power of withdrawal, of expropriation “sur les choses, le temps, les corps et finalement la vie; il culminait dans le privilège de s’en emparer pour la supprimer” (Foucault, 1976a, p 179). With biopolitics – with roots dating back to the eighteenth century (Foucault, 2004b), but whose birth conventionally corresponds to the emanation of the Beveridge Report of 1942 (Foucault, 1976b) – the expression of power

has changed radically. It is exercised on “populations” that must be guided on the demographic level, on the care of the body, on the mechanisms of the production of thought and the control of emotions with the aim of increasing their “fitness”, the ability to adapt to environmental conditions (Bazzicalupo, 2010). Within it, the normalisation processes, typical of the disciplinary *dispositifs* and aimed at the production of “les corps dociles” (Foucault, 1975, pp. 137-171), do not fail: the “technologies of power” and the “technologies of self” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18), while retaining a functional space of independence, often resolve into each other, forming the outline of an ambivalent plot.

The medical disciplines, including psychiatry and psychology, intertwine their destiny with that of the biopolitical *dispositifs* in a material game of reciprocal legitimisation of research programs, political intervention and increase in production capacity. The relationship between the *dispositifs* themselves and economic disciplines are different: it is structural. Biopolitics, in fact, emerge when the exigency to satisfy basic needs declines, when the need to escape death decreases and the possibility of investing in life takes place. In other words, it represents a condition and a consequence of the development of capitalism (Foucault, 1976a, pp. 184-186).

In *Naissance de la biopolitique* (2004b), Foucault explains in further detail why these biopolitical *dispositifs* qualify as neoliberal. Theodore W. Schultz and Gary S. Becker, belonging to the School of Chicago, have developed the analysis of the work done by classical political economy and have introduced the concept of *human capital* that “c’est l’ensemble de tous les facteurs physiques psychologiques, qui rendent quelqu’un capable de gagner tel ou tel salaire” (Foucault, 2004b, p.230). A key concept that allows the neoliberal economy to deal with life experience that had never been examined before from an economic point of view: fertility, marriage, drug trafficking, allocation of time, remuneration of the law enforcement and corruption (Becker, 1998). What is the goal? Foucault’s answer is fundamental to our reasoning:

Une économie faite d’unités-entreprises, une société faite d’unités-entreprises: c’est cela qui est, à la fois, le principe de déchiffrement lié au libéralisme et sa programmation pour la

rationalisation et d'une société et d'une économie (Foucault, 2004b, p. 231).

Through this way we return to the *homo oeconomicus*, as “grille d'intelligibilité” of the *otium* and of the *negotium*. Such biopolitic *dispositifs* exercise their power over the subjects and their lives through the hold they have on *homo oeconomicus*. In fact, he behaves rationally when, as Becker states, he allocates the scarce resources he possesses on the basis of the contextual conditions. It follows that to regulate their conduct it is sufficient to manipulate the environment: “L'*homo oeconomicus*, c'est celui qui est éminemment gouvernable” (Foucault, 2004b, p. 274).

We have tried synthetically to identify some fundamental properties of the neoliberal biopolitic *dispositifs*. Below, we will *show*, conforming still to an inductive rather than hypothetical-deductive canon, how they are isomorphic to the childhood image promoted by the Reggio pedagogy.

Contrary to what Hoyuelos has proposed (2014, p.25), the image of childhood is not, in our opinion, just a theory. Nor does it represent the pure halfway point of the congruence between theory and practice. With great probability this term does not have only a denotative meaning, as one might imagine in light of a naive interpretation of the relationship between *imago* and *res*. If children represent a kantian *noumenon*, childhood and its image are the product of a non-universal, but historically determined, categorial apparatus. But even this last position is approximate.

In fact, an image of childhood is, in our opinion, a *concretion* among elements of a different nature (Giacomantonio, Luciano, 2018). The scientific propositions are probably within it: see, for example, the learning processes of children and how they are widely explained using socio-constructivist theories or how cognitive-behavioural hypotheses are used to quash socially undesirable behaviour. But in the same image, common sense propositions also seem to legitimately reside – such as frequent references to the imagination or innate curiosity of children as properties independent of any scientific theory or to the still widespread use of the concept of *whim* to explain infantile behaviour – and national and international regulatory propositions – that directly or indirectly govern both the building, the

spaces and the furnishings of the services and the tasks, choices and proposals of the educators on the basis of the hegemonic image of childhood. Apparently belonging to these concretions are also propositions that describe, with strong generalizations, the characteristics of current Western children – whose value of truth sometimes resides in the outcomes of scientific inquiry, otherwise in the empirical experience – and propositions that, more or less explicitly, indicate which values, attitudes, behaviours and skills should be acquired in educational services and, hopefully, must characterise the adult population. Therefore, the image of the child and childhood would be constituted by a set of statements whose statute is very variable: some are descriptive, others prescriptive, others still co-exist even when they are based on irreconcilable scientific theories. Within images of childhood, however, there are not only propositions, but also indescribable, analogical elements: they are the established practices, often instinctive, that are transmitted from one generation of workers to the next.

As well as every *dispositif* is a *heterogeneous set*, it seems that the image of childhood is a concretion of equally heterogeneous elements. Within it, the interweaving of knowledge and power – another defining element of any *dispositif* – already emerges from what we have just said. Mapping is theoretically necessary if we consider, as we have implicitly done so far, that the image of childhood forms a synolon with education, that every educational act necessarily involves an exercise of power and that reflection on education accompanies the development of Western thought from its origins; the consequent naturalisation of the relationship between knowledge and power in the educational field allows us to treat this very relationship as if it were *structural* even on the theoretical level.

It remains to be asked whether the image of childhood exercises a strategic function and, possibly, which type. In other words, if on the basis of our reasoning we can hypothesize that the image of childhood is by its nature a *dispositif*, then we must understand if it is qualifiable, in the contemporary context, as a neoliberal biopolitics.

We continue our programmatic reasoning by briefly examining – by way of example – some educational techniques (*à la* Foucault) used within different services, among which those that adopt the Reggio approach: assembly, lunch, educational proposals and play. They are

widely known and diversely studied (see purely by way of example: Bondioli, 1996; Bondioli, Mantovani, 1997; Catarsi, Fortunati, 2004; Cavallini, Tedeschi, 2007; Edwards, Gandini, Forman, 2017).

Children do not show up in services like *tabulae rasae*: when they enter, they have already developed a rich patrimony of action schemes both cognitively and emotionally. These techniques allow them, valuing their differences, to adapt confidently to a new environment: they are able to foresee what will happen in the near future and can enjoy the introduction of new elements that do not condemn to the repetition of the identical. They learn to reflect individually and collectively on their own behaviour by elaborating alternative action strategies when their conduct appears to be not conform with the historic norms that govern collective life. By comparing new phenomena or manipulating unfamiliar materials, children enrich their repertoire of action patterns and dispositions to learn according to unexpected and unpredictable directions, not artificially constrained within the narrow limits of verbal or logical–mathematical language.

It seems possible, however, that these same techniques are amphibolic. They probably promote processes of normalisation that govern the body and soul by acting over time, over space, over the composition of energies. They could contribute to the internalisation of truth-production mechanisms on themselves, consistent with the principles of veridiction and truthful hegemony. The same liberation of strength and, in particular, of the disposition to learn, seems to lead towards the mastery of the executive functions on which the strategic competences and key competencies are based (Pellerey, 2017). If read in this perspective, it would almost seem as if these educational techniques develop in the child the human capital necessary to become a productive worker, to exercise their rights and duties with awareness, to promote an inclusive society and sustainable economic development. If so, the “grille d’intelligibilité” becomes that of the *infantia or economics* prodromal compared to that of the *homo oeconomicus*.

Suggestions *à la* Dewey that are refinable and refining. They allow, however, for it to be assumed with caution that the image of childhood elaborated and diffused from the *Reggio approach* could be a neoliberal biopolitic *dispositif*.

In this perspective the proposal made by the democratic approach

(Moss, 2009; Fielding, Moss, 2011; Children in Europe, 2008) and its image of childhood seem neither utopian nor radical. Each form of government structures the space of action possible for a subject. A space that provides both a productive structure and a functional opposition to the development of the same historic configuration of power relations. In this sense, the democratic hypothesis probably does not take on the role of the real antagonist, but the functional one of the deuteragonist.

### 3. The bare life

We have reached the third hypothesis aforementioned in the *Prologue*. In our opinion, a radical and utopian proposal criticises the limits of biopolitical governmentality. We do not demonstrate or show, more simply we exemplify.

Biopolitics consists of a form of government that holds a grip on life, in Greek ζωή (*zoé*) and βίος (*bios*). Two terms to which we currently attribute the same meaning, but the former originally indicated the *bare life* and the second *form of life*,

Une vie qui ne peut jamais être séparée de sa forme, une vie dont il n'est jamais possible d'isoler quelque chose comme une vie nue [...]. Elle définit une vie – la vie humaine – dans laquelle les modes, les actes et les processus singuliers du vivre ne sont jamais simplement des faits, mais toujours et avant tout des possibilités de vie, toujours et avant tout des puissances. Tout comportement et toute forme du vivre humain ne sont jamais prescrits par une vocation biologique spécifique, ni assignés par une nécessité quelconque, maison bien qu'habituels, répétés et socialement obligatoires, ils conservent toujours le caractère d'une possibilité, autrement dit, ils mettent toujours en jeu le vivre même (Agamben, 1993, pp. 81-82).

The man is consequently the only animal whose happiness depends on the form assumed by living, by the way in which power becomes act. Therefore, the *form-of-life* is necessarily a political affair.

However, it seems that western political power is based “sur la sé-

paration d'une sphère de la vie nue par rapport au contexte des formes de vie" (Agamben, 1993, p.82). The thesis is based on quick genealogical analyses. In Roman law, the only case in which the term *life* is used in a legal sense is with the expression *vitae necisque potestas*, which indicates the power that can be exercised by the *pater* on the bare life of the male child. The western concept of sovereignty probably stands rests on the same power. In fact, by means of its exercise, the Leviathan reduces the risks to which bare life is exposed in the state of nature. In the state of exception, which has now become the norm, the proliferation of the *dispositifs* and the hand-to-hand between these and the human being make the processes of anthropogenesis become acts of desubjectivation (Agamben, 1993, 1995, 2009).

In biopolitical governmentality, bare life is a little problematized concept. Presented in the guise of a scientific notion, it is indeed a secularized political concept. The reduction *a infans* of critical reflection allows the spread of representations – pseudoscientific for Agamben – medical, economic and educational, we add, that in the name of adaptation to the environment have as their real purpose "Une économie faite d'unités-entreprises, une société faite d'unités-entreprises".

Which way to escape? How to avoid this form of government and its processes of anthropogenesis? How to exercise criticism? How to emancipate from the scission between bare life and form of life? Still just an example.

The modern state is able to exert its biopolitical hold on bare life on two conditions: birth and territory. A subject, in fact, becomes a citizen if he is born within a space bounded by national borders (Agamben, 1996, p. 39). The institute of the modern state, therefore, goes into crisis where it cannot hold: the citizen. When the *citizen*, in other words, is replaced by the *denizen* (Agamben, 1996, p. 27). Consequently, the current tragic migratory phenomena seem to represent a new, problematic opportunity to rethink the categories and forms of exercising the power of the dying modern state, to re-establish politics and necessarily education.

#### 4. Violating boundary lines

In the event that the set of hypotheses formulated had a high empirical content, then it would be understandable the reason why the image of childhood promoted by the market approach and the democratic approach could coincide with that of the *infantia oeconomica*. This hypothesis would also explain why a large part of the didactics and experimental pedagogy seems to be striving to increase, through, for example, the competence-based didactics and evidence based research, the power exercised by neoliberal biopolitics; it would also explain why part of special pedagogy seems to invest its energies in the normalisation of learning disorders to increase their productivity.

From this specific perspective, imagining the possibility that educational bodies can promote democracy by democratising themselves does not seem to be a radical proposal. Just as it is not a radical proposal to denounce the effects of liberalism and neo-liberalism on education policies. They are all probably epiphenomena of the relationship which, according to Foucault, links science and politics.

To be disobedient *à la* Foucault and try to change the *status quo* – not necessarily limited to the educational one – we need to ask ourselves other questions. We must wonder, for example, how to emancipate ourselves from the scission between bare life and the form of life, restoring to politics what is appropriate to it: the orientation to the happiness of man.

For scientific knowledge, perhaps this perspective implies finding a way to overcome the crisis denounced in his own way by Edmund Husserl (1965) and generated by the inability to treat some of the problems that man perceives as vital.

It is not just a matter of investing in the rigor with which research is carried out in the individual scientific disciplines. But, above all, to increase the number of the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research series. In fact, any reflection enclosed in the narrow confines of a disciplinary area – such as pedagogy or didactics – risks being both blind and empty. Take for example the *desired profile about the adult population* (Vertecchi, 2001) – which is implicit in both the market approach and the democratic approach to child education. Together with anthropological models, images of childhood and adult man, it

represents the term *ad quem*, the final cause, of education and training cycles. The question is purely a political one. However, pedagogical and didactic reflection cannot avoid this analysis. Therefore, it should necessarily take place in an inter- or, better still, trans-disciplinary perspective.

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