

Blackheath Blue Mountains, Philosophy Forum, 16 April 2016**Michel Foucault: Biopolitics as a new Paradigm of Power¹****Vanessa Lemm, University of New South Wales**

The social sciences are indebted to Michel Foucault for a new conception of power known as biopolitics. Whereas traditionally it was thought that power was simply the capacity to make someone else do what they would not otherwise have done, Foucault discovered that power went much deeper because it was deeply intertwined with knowledge. Power not only governs our actions but it also structures our sense of ourselves. For that reason, power is not an attribute of persons: it is more like a network or field of asymmetrical relations between individuals. For the same reason, power is not just repressive, but enabling or empowering for these individuals.

Foucault distinguishes among three different senses of the term biopolitics. Late in his career, he discovered that the meeting between biological sciences and policy sciences occurs in the context of a major transformation in this general conception of power. When he first employs the term biopolitics in the mid-1970s, he meant to identify a new kind of power which is carried forward by technologies and discourses of security that take the life of populations as their object, and play a central role in the emergence of modern racism and eugenics. However, Foucault also connects biopolitics to the kind of political rationality characteristic of the liberal and neoliberal forms of government and governance. Biopolitics then refers not only to technologies of security but also to what he calls technologies of self. Lastly, there is in Foucault a third use of the term where biopolitics refers to the possibility that life itself may function as a source of critique and resistance to these power formations.

¹ This talk is based on a book chapter forthcoming as „Michel Foucault’s Perspective on Biopolitics“, in *Handbook of Biology and Politics*, co-authored with Miguel Vatter, ed. Steven A. Peterson, London: Edward Elgar Publishers 2016 (in press).

These different uses of the term biopolitics overlap insofar as they all describe the historical discontinuity through which, as Foucault says,

for the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge's field of control and power's sphere of intervention (Foucault 1990 142).

The Foucaultian idea that biological existence is 'reflected' in political existence should not be confused with the view that biopolitics means understanding the state on the model of a living organism, nor with the project of understanding political and social phenomena by applying models drawn from evolutionary biology, nor with the view that biopolitics simply designates the entrance of issues concerning biological life into the sphere of political discussion and decision-making (as occurs in bioethics). All these views presuppose that life and politics are independent of each other, and that one can apply the understanding of one sphere to the other.

In contrast, Foucault holds that biopolitics constitutes a transformation in the nature of political power itself: 'For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question' (Foucault 1990 143). This definition of biopolitics is crucial in several respects. While, for Aristotle, the political existence of the human being both presupposes and transcends its animality, Foucault claims that, at least for modern men, the essential concern of political life lies in the status of their animality, of their biological existence: 'Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world' (Foucault 1990 142).

Foucault's point is that biopolitics develops a conception of life as a function of a discourse about how best to govern and control this very life. Today a typical example of

what Foucault means is the concept of resilience where ideas about biology are meshed together with discourses on public policy and genres of self-help in order to produce technologies of security and of self designed to govern what appears to be ungovernable and uncontrollable events, from natural disasters to terrorist attacks. In what follows, I will present the various aspects of biopolitics identified by Foucault.

Biopolitics and Population: the Idea of the Norm

Living beings can take their own biological life as object of government in several ways. In the first place, the social and political sciences had to introduce the concept of a “population” in order for power to be exercised over human beings as a living species. This new object is studied in order to track the processes affecting the variation in populations (birth rates, death rates, health, life expectancy, levels of happiness, etc.) and a new science of statistics was invented for this purpose (Foucault 1990: 139). Whereas the idea of a people refers to a group of individuals who are considered as abstract juridical persons, as bearers of legal rights and duties, the biopolitical idea of population considers individuals as specimens of a living species who need to be controlled individually and as a totality (Foucault, 2000). Related but different, Foucault discovered also the existence of disciplinary power, which, by way of contrast, is “centred on *the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities*,[...] the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls” (Foucault 1990, 139) (emphasis by the authors).

Both biopolitics and disciplinary power focus on the bodies of the individuals, rather than on individuals as abstract juridical persons: it is a form of power that operates through norms rather than laws. Laws presuppose a sovereign form of power that ultimately turns on “the ancient right to take life or let live.” But in Foucault’s usage, norms reflect a new conception of power characterised by “a power to foster life or disallow it” (Foucault 1990:

138). Disciplinary power uses the idea of norm as an external standard against which bodies can be measured in terms of their normality or abnormality, and also as a means to discipline these bodies. Biopolitics, instead, uses the idea of norm that derives from the biological sciences. Norms refer to the self-regulatory powers of living organisms, and their capacity to create new norms for themselves when adherence to established behaviours and patterns would lead or keep the organisms in pathological states.

Both disciplinary and biopower are powers of normalization, but the meaning of the term is distinct in each. Foucault distinguishes between what he calls the “normation” of disciplinary power and the “normalisation” of biopower (Foucault 2007). In general terms, a norm does not operate through the binary terms that characterize one’s attitude toward a law which leaves open a choice to either follow or break the law. With respect to a norm there is no such possibility of judging the norm from the outside: when one does not follow norms, one is not breaking them; one is simply showing dysfunctional or abnormal behaviour. The consequence is that the normal is completely porous to the abnormal and conversely. The mechanisms and technologies of normalization which are intended to separate, or exclude and control the abnormal population operate by interiorizing and internalizing into the normal population what they have separated.

These consequences were the results of Foucault’s ground-breaking investigations into the history of prisons (Foucault, 1995). The development of prisons revealed themselves to be but the expression of civil society as a carceral society where citizens were criminalized even though they had not broken any laws. The carceral society was achieved by generalizing the panoptical structure of prisons so that all members of society were placed under constant observation, study and control.

Biopolitics and Racism

Foucault argues that when individuals are considered as specimens of a population of living beings, biopower takes the form of a technology of security. Today, one is familiar with biometrics and all sorts of profiling as typical examples of such technology. However, one can say that there are two main and antithetical paths that technologies of security can take in order to assure the growth and expansion of the populations delivered to their care. The first path, according to Foucault, is adopted by what other social scientists have called totalitarian regimes, but which were also widely used in colonial and settler societies whose home governments were nominally liberal. Here, the concept of population is parsed along racial and ethnic lines, in order to place these racial and ethnical groupings in a hierarchy, often conceived in terms of a social-Darwinist construal of the struggle of the fittest. In a second moment, these hierarchies are used to justify forms of state racism, eugenics, apartheid, and genocide, under the principle that the “health” of the “higher” or “more developed” races and ethnic groups needs to be defended against the “lower” or “more primitive” races and ethnic groups (Foucault, 2003).

In this totalitarian variation, biopolitics becomes a form of what Foucault terms “thanatopolitics,” (or, politics of death) in the sense that the logic of “defending” the “purity” and “health” of one “species” of human beings over and against other such “species” calls forth not only state-imposed eugenic policies, but also the “concentration” of these populations into camps, and eventually their “extermination” as “life not worthy of being lived”.

The racist and thanatopolitical turn taken by biopolitics, especially in the late 19th and 20th centuries, merits an explanation for it is at first sight paradoxical: how can biopolitics understood as a form of power over life that seeks to preserve and reproduce species life acquire the right to put this same life to death? Foucault’s hypothesis is that this occurs through the development of modern, state racism. Races are a bio-political way to divide the

human species into sub-groups. This division is instrumental to conceiving the distinction between self and other, friend and enemy, no longer in military terms but in biological ones: “the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race [...] is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer” (Foucault 2003, 257). The state legitimates its power to kill as a function of the protection of society from the “biological danger” that races represent.

However, it is a highly debated question whether state and so-called “scientific” racisms are the main expression of modern biopolitics, or, to the contrary, whether they qualify as reactive attempts by the sovereign power of the state to re-establish its sovereign “right of life and death” in an epoch in which biopolitics, as the “power to keep alive,” (Foucault, 1990) is the ascendant type of power. Foucault seems to have held on to the second hypothesis, claiming that racism – with its obsession in terms of the purity of blood – belongs to a sovereign logic of power more than to a biopolitical logic of power. Consequently, Foucault seems more inclined to claim that the most proper expression of biopower and biopolitics is adopted by liberalism and neoliberalism, that is, in regimes where the life of a population is maximized not along totalitarian but rather along neo-liberal lines. Here we find Foucault’s crucial hypothesis that liberalism and neo-liberalism provide the framework within which to understand biopolitics (Foucault, 2008). Before, I turn to this hypothesis I need to introduce Foucault’s idea of governmentality and its relation to biopolitics.

From Pastoral Power to Liberal Governmentality: the Idea of Conduct

Foucault traces the idea of governmentality back to Greek political thought and forwards up to the study of liberalism and neoliberalism as exemplary of the most recent forms of governmentality. Although the historical span of Foucault’s studies on

governmentality is enormous, ranging from the ancient city state to the contemporary neoliberal state of our days, there is a term that serves as the guiding-thread: not that of norm but that of conduct.

Foucault defines governmentality in terms of the problem of leading or conducting the conduct of individuals (Foucault, 2010). This reflexive expression, “the conduct of conduct,” is intended to highlight the central feature of governmentality, namely, that the subject who is governed is also at the same time the subject who governs.

According to Foucault’s genealogy, the modern science of policy studies finds its oldest roots not in the Greek or Roman traditions of politics but rather in the emergence of a Christian type of “pastoral power” (Foucault 2007: 115-190; Foucault, 2000: 298-327). Pastoral power is a salvation-oriented form of power that conceives of its subjects as members of a species analogous to a herd of domesticated animals. The important terms to understand governmentality, namely, security, territory and population are tied to the idea of pastoral power in the sense that this power envisages a group or population (“herd”) that is recollected by another group (“shepherds”) through a spatial division of territory (a spatial grid, a normative order), designed to provide security to the group. Foucault defines pastoral power as “an art of conducting, directing, leading, guiding, taking in hand, and manipulating men, an art of monitoring them and urging them step by step, an art with the function of taking charge of men collectively and individually throughout their life and at every single moment of their existence” (Foucault 2007: 165). It is a form of power that is primarily concerned with the biological life of the species insofar as “salvation is first of all essentially subsistence,” “food assured,” “good pastures” (Foucault 2007: 126-7). However, pastoral power does not only treat human beings collectively as a living species or sub-species, but since its form of power is “a relationship of the submission of one individual to another”

(Foucault 2007: 175), it is also creative of modes of “individualization,” or what Foucault calls modes of “subjection [*assujettissement*]” (Foucault, 2007, 184).

This individualization is acquired through two central procedures, or power techniques: “by a whole network of servitudes that involves the general servitude of everyone with regard to everyone and, at the same time, the exclusion of the self, of the ego and of egoism, as the the central, nuclear form of the individual” (Foucault 2007, 184). This idea, of clear religious connotations, refers to the demand that one become an individual essentially by dedicating oneself to the general well-being of all, and by giving up the “care of one’s self” for the sake of the “love of the neighbor.”

The second technology of individualization which comes from considering the human being as a species is “through the production of an internal, secret and hidden truth” (Foucault 2007, 184). This inner truth belongs to each and every individual; and the shepherd or pastor is charged with identifying it through the discursive practice of confession, which simultaneously assures integral obedience. Foucault had come upon this form of power in his study of sexuality, where one’s sexuality functioned as the individual’s “inner truth” that could be attained only in a confessional discourse.

To sum up, one can say that in pastoral politics, the human being’s existence as a living being is at stake in two ways. First, the human being’s biological existence is totalized into the life of a species – every single human being as a living being is subsumed under the totality of the species. This aspect of pastoral power lends itself to the subsequent introduction of procedures of selection, extinction, adaptation that would be underpinned by the fusion of themes from evolutionary biology back to the social sciences. Second, the human being’s existence as a living being is particularized into separate, isolated, individual subjects. Pastoral power thus manages to bring together a conception of a very intimate form of power that guides individuals in and through their most recondite interiority (the space of

bad conscience, guilt feelings, and authenticity), which was previously hidden from power, with a self-reflexive approach to the self that inaugurates a modern conception of subjectivity. Thus, subjectivity and subjection, truth and power, are joined together. One becomes a “free” subject by submitting oneself to forms of subjectivation that lead to individual salvation, but in the ascetic and inner-worldly terms of self-discipline and health.

Biopolitics and Police

Foucault’s main hypothesis about modern governmentality is that the pastoral idea of conduct transformed itself from the Christian period to the early modern period, where it re-emerges in liberalism in the form of the science of police and policy (*Polizeiwissenschaft*). Here the guiding question for Foucault is how can one govern individuality? or what does liberalism as a form of government (as a conduct of conduct) mean?

Foucault’s answer is that liberal governmentality must be a function of *laissez-faire*: its government must work by limiting the capacity for intervention on the part of the state and its sovereign power into the economic and legal orders, because these work spontaneously or by self-regulation, and thus any external intervention from the part of the state, any attempt at planning either economy or law, ends up having negative consequences. But Foucault also shows that liberal governmentality requires that the individual assume responsibility for the conditions of reproduction of its own liberty. Here liberal and neoliberal governmentality crucially depend on the adoption of economic rationality as the rationality of governmentality.

But if the desired conduct for liberal governmentality is a free conduct, then this freedom must itself be a product of liberal governmentality, and the question becomes: under what conditions is individual freedom produced and reproduced? Foucault answered this question by arguing that security is the condition of liberal freedom. Foucault’s work is

fundamental in the current reinterpretation of the idea of security which has placed it squarely within the discourse of biopolitical governance. For Foucault, the dependence of liberal freedom on security explains the rise of policy or police sciences in the early stages of modernity because the purveyor of security in a liberal civil society is the police. By police Foucault does not mean simply law enforcement agencies, but all policy-making endeavors of the modern state.

According to the liberal logic of political rationality, the limits of state rationality are given by the economic system, by a free market mechanism which is understood to operate according to natural laws of its own. Foucault describes the 18th century *homo oeconomicus* as an individual who “pursues his own interests, and whose interest is such that it converges spontaneously with the interest of others” such as in the classical understanding of the invisible hand that naturally produces a harmonious social order out of the interaction between competing individuals (Foucault 2008: 270-1). If the state should contravene the natural laws of production and exchange, or unduly intervene in the free market mechanism, the state would be acting irrationally, and would thus fall into a crisis of governmentality which is simultaneously a crisis of legitimacy. In this type of political rationality, the legitimacy of the state is given by a self-limitation of the art of government, but the limits are now set by the “nature” of commodities transacted on a free market. To govern, according to this model of liberal governmentality, means to know when to let things be, *laissez-faire*. The art of liberal government does not turn on what the state does for society, but, rather, on what it does not do for society.

From Liberalism to Neoliberalism: Technologies of Self and Entrepreneurship

The main shift that Foucault identifies between the 19th century liberal doctrine of *laissez-faire* and the emergence of neoliberal doctrine at the end of World War II concerns

the conditions of spontaneous orders. Indeed, whereas Adam Smith may have believed that such orders are providential, thinkers like Hayek argued that if a free market, as opposed to a planned economy, was to emerge, then the economy had to be regulated in such a way that competition would not be stifled by the rise of monopolies, by high levels of poverty or inequality, and all individuals could effectively become enterprising in their economic conducts. In discussing the neo-liberal political technology of control, Foucault at one point says that such a technology is intended to make it possible for individuals to be free and responsible within civil society, where this freedom and responsibility is condensed in the figure of the entrepreneur (Foucault 2008).

At the same time, at another point of *The Birth of Biopolitics* Foucault says that “the panopticon, that is the formula for liberal government” (Foucault 2008, 67). Since liberalism is the context within which, on Foucault’s hypothesis, biopolitics becomes truly deployed, the above assertion raises the general, and for many commentators puzzling, question as to the relation between disciplinary power and biopower in Foucault’s conception of governmentality. In what way does the panopticon function as a biopolitical, and not simply disciplinary, political technology of the self? The answer becomes more apparent only with the development from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism. For it is in this development that the panoptical technology is put to a new use: from being a disciplinary device of the carceral society it becomes a biopolitical form of control of the conduct of individuals that enables them to be free and responsible, entrepreneurs of their own (species) life. A perfect example of this new usage of panopticism is the development of wearables intended to monitor everything from blood sugar levels to how many steps one has taken each day. On this hypothesis, only when the biological life of the individual is placed under total observation and control does the negative liberty which the self-limitation of sovereignty grants its subjects no longer become a source of insecurity, which is activity-inhibiting, but rather

invites the individual to become enterprising, and unleashes what political economists will call the competition that lies at the heart of all production of surplus value in late capitalism. This total control and oversight that is achieved with the universalization of panopticism in the transition from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism is biopolitical in the sense that it permits the generalized insurance of life that allows it to engage the mechanisms of civil society without being inhibited by the insecurity that civil society always generates.

As Foucault makes clear at the end of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, the motivation to study government is given by the task to understand the rise of civil society and of the *homo oeconomicus*, that is, of a human type that is the product of the constant application of economic thinking in all areas of natural and social life. This human type is the unique product of a modern conduct of conducts which Foucault calls neoliberalism. Foucault thought that the regulations imposed by neoliberal biopolitics in view of permitting spontaneous orders were all based on the attempt to mimic this polarity of life, and so achieve a regulation of conduct that would appear as normal as possible, where normality is now understood to include the occasional transgression of established patterns, the acknowledgement of the subject's authenticity and creativity, hence the idea of the entrepreneur of himself (Foucault 2008, 226). Such an individual does not rely on political institutions for its preservation and protection but instead takes his life in his own hands: "Being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earning" (Foucault 2008, 226).

Conclusion: Resistance, Critique and Human Rights in the Age of Biopolitics

As mentioned at the start, there remains to discuss the final aspect of Foucault's idea of biopolitics, namely, the possibility of developing alternative "forms of life" that may be the source of resistance and critique to power. Foucault's claim is that power is constitutive of

our sense of self, or subjectivity. But in order to be so, power has to be as self-reflexive as we are about ourselves: thus if we are able to “conduct our conducts” it must be also possible to engage in what Foucault calls “counter-conducts”. In short, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1990, 95).

The systems of pastoral servitude and of the biopolitical regulation of life generate their own forms of resistance. Counter-conducts free the individual from the need to be led by others and are movements that seek to escape the direction of other and “define the way for each to conduct himself” (Foucault 2007, 195). It is for this reason that Foucault dedicated the last lecture series before his death to an investigation into the ways in which Socratic philosophy and the various schools of philosophy that emerged from the Socratic example made possible a “care of self” that was not pastoral, and led to an idea of “frank speech” (*parrhesia*) in the face of those who claim to govern us. This idea of frank speech is at the root of our modern ideal of critique as a possibility of knowledge that goes counter to power as governmentality, i.e., that questions the rationality of power.

The resistance to biopower does not transcend the horizon of “a living species in a living world” (Foucault 1990: 142). Resistance counteracts the processes of individualization, the constitution of the subject in and through its transformation into a species, by cultivating or caring for the self in the sense of redefining the status of the human being’s animality. Foucault’s critique of biopolitics as a politics of the domination of the animal life of the human being seeks to create the possibility for a different relationship to the self. The formula for this other relationship to the self passes through culture, through a cultivation of nature, which does not dominate nature or animal life but, to the contrary, emphasizes its creative potential. Foucault understands the biological life of the self as a function of creativity, rather than understanding creativity as a particular quality of the self. These intuitions are consonant with much work in contemporary biology that denies the humanistic assumption that only

human forms of life have culture or language. In the humanities, we speak of posthumanism to designate this new approach to animal and plant life, and its consequences for the self-understanding of human beings as living beings (Wolfe, 2010; Braidotti, 2006).

The last dimension opened up by Foucault concerns the relation between counter-conducts and rights. Towards the end of his life, Foucault engaged himself strongly in favor of human rights, understood as a “new right – that of private individuals to effectively intervene in the sphere of international policy and strategy” (Foucault 2000, 475). In another late text, Foucault hypothesizes that human rights, understood from within the horizon of biopolitics, are no longer based on the right to be free or the right to be equal, but they should be based on what he calls a right to be different, which is probably best understood as a basic right not to be treated as a statistics, as a specimen of a population that is placed under control, observation and regulation by any of the policy sciences currently adopted by governments. Related to these rights, Foucault also theorized an idea of relational rights, that is, rights and duties that emerge from the kind of forms of life that counter-conducts permit, such as the right to gay marriage that, for Foucault, would be a right that emerges from a gay form of life, different from the form of life based on a normative heterosexuality, but no less capable of generating binding rights and duties on the government (Foucault 1994, 160 “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will”). It is clear that in our ever more networked forms of life, all such rights will become increasingly more crucial.

I will end on this note and hope that the various aspects of Foucault’s conception of biopolitics that I have presented offer you a different way to think about our contemporary world and the power relations reflected in our current situation. Thank you.