

Introduction

The notion of biopolitics has recently become a buzzword. While a few years ago it was only known to a limited number of experts, the term is used today in many different disciplines and discourses. Beyond the limited domain of specialists, it is also attracting increasing interest among the general public. The notion is employed to discuss asylum policies, but also the prevention of AIDS and questions of demographic change. Biopolitics may be used to denote issues as diverse as financial support for agricultural products, promotion of medical research, legal regulations on abortion, and advance directives of patients specifying their preferences concerning life-prolonging measures.¹ But there are not only a range of views about the empirical object of biopolitics, the normative implications are also disputed. Some argue strongly that “biopolitics” is necessarily bound to rational decision-making and the democratic organisation of social life, while others link the term to the murder of patients, eugenics and racism. The notion of biopolitics figures prominently in texts of the Old Right, but it is also used by representatives of the New Left. It is employed by both critics and advocates of biotechnological progress, by committed Marxist and unapologetic racists. A third line of disagreement concerns historical definitions and delimitations. Does biopolitics go back to Antiquity, or even to the invention of agriculture? Or, by contrast, is biopolitics the result of contemporary biotechnological innovations marking “the threshold of a new era” (Mietzsch 2002, 4)?

Plural and divergent meanings are undoubtedly evoked when people refer to biopolitics. This is surprising, since it seems to be quite clear what the notion signifies. Literally, the word denotes a politics that deals with life (Greek: *bios*). But this is where the problems start. What some take to be a trivial fact (“Doesn’t all politics deal with life?”) marks a clear-cut criterion of exclusion for others. For the latter, politics is situated beyond biological life. From this point of view, “biopolitics” has to be considered an oxymoron, a combination of two contradictory terms. The advocates of this position claim that politics in the classical sense is about common action and decision-making, and is exactly what transcends the necessities of bodily experiences and biological facts – thus opening up the realm of freedom and human interaction.

This book seeks to bring clarity to this confusion by offering general orientation on the topic of biopolitics. Since this is the first introduction to this subject, I cannot rely on previous

¹ Cf. the contributions to the recently published “encyclopaedia of biopolitics” (Brandimarte et al. 2006).

works or an established canon with an organisation and structure. Furthermore, “biopolitics” constitutes a theoretical and empirical field that crosses traditional borders of knowledge and undermines the traditional academic and intellectual division of labour. It follows that there are no clear disciplinary boundaries to rely on. Against this background, this introduction has two objectives. On the one hand, it seeks to provide a systematic overview of the history of the notion of biopolitics; on the other hand, it seeks to explore its relevance in contemporary theoretical debates.

To avoid a possible misunderstanding: this book does not intent to offer a neutral account or an objective representation of the diverse historical and contemporary meanings of the term “biopolitics”. On the contrary, I will analyse the different biopolitical concepts from a distinctive theoretical perspective that I will specify below. Defining biopolitics and specifying its meaning is not a value-free activity following a universal logic of research that seeks to uncover the reality of biopolitics, but rather an integral part of a shifting and conflicting theoretical and political field. Each answer to the question of what processes and structures, what rationalities and technologies, what epochs and historical eras could be called “biopolitical” is always and inevitably the result of a partial and selective perspective. In this respect, each definition of biopolitics must sharpen its analytical and critical profile against the “blind spots” and weak points of competing suggestions.

My proposal’s point of departure is the virtual polarisation that is attached to the merger of life and politics in the notion of biopolitics.² The existing concepts differ in respect of which part of the word they emphasise. It is possible to distinguish naturalistic concepts that take life as the basis of politics and to contrast these with politicist concepts which conceive of life processes as the object of politics.³ The former constitutes a heterogeneous group of theories that will be presented in the first chapter. The spectrum runs from organicist concepts of the state in the first decades of the 20th century via racist modes of reasoning during National Socialism to biologicistic ideas in contemporary political science. The politicist antipode regards biopolitics as a domain of practice or a sub-discipline of politics, aiming at the regulation and steering of life processes. Since the 1960s this line of interpretation has existed essentially in two different forms: first as an ecological biopolitics that pursues conservative and defensive objectives and seeks to bind politics to the preservation and protection of the natural environment, and second in a technical reading of biopolitics whose advocates are more interested in dynamic development and productivist expansion than in preservation and

² For different proposals see Heins and Flitner 1998; Buchstein and Beier 2004.

³ By politicism I mean the idea of the political domain as a self-contained and self-reproducing unity, which tends to exaggerate the autonomy of the political (see Jessop 1985, 73).

protection. The latter defines a new field of politics that is emerging as a result of new medical and scientific knowledge and biotechnological applications. This interpretation is especially popular nowadays and is regularly cited in political discussions and media debates to describe the social and political implications and potential of biotechnological innovations. The different dimensions of the politicist discourse are presented in the second chapter.

The central thesis of the book is that both lines of interpretation fail to capture essential dimensions of biopolitical processes. Apart from their obvious differences, the politicist and the naturalist position share some basic assumptions. Both conceptions are based on the idea of a stable hierarchy and an external relationship between life and politics. The advocates of naturalism regard life as being “beneath” politics, directing and explaining political reasoning and action. The politicist conception sees politics as being “above” life processes; here, politics is more than “pure” biology, going beyond the necessities of natural existence. Each fundamental position on the problem of biopolitics relies on the stability of one pole of the semantic field in order to explain variations in the other pole. Either biology accounts for politics, or politics regulates biology. However, this means that both conceptions fail to explain the instability and fragility of the border between “life” and “politics” – and it is exactly this instability that has prompted so many people to take up the notion of biopolitics. As the two approaches take “life” and “politics” as isolated phenomena, they are both unable to account for their relationality and historicity. The emergence of the notion of biopolitics signals a double negation (cf. Nancy 2002): in contrast to naturalist positions, life does not represent a stable ontological and normative point of reference. The impact of biotechnological innovations has demonstrated that life processes are transformable and controllable to an increasing degree, which renders obsolete any idea of an intact nature untouched by human action. Thus, nature can only be regarded as part of nature-society associations. At the same time it has become clear that biopolitics also marks a significant transformation of politics. Life is not only the object of politics and external to political decision-making, it affects the core of politics - the political subject. Biopolitics is not the expression of a sovereign will, but aims at the administration and regulation of life processes on the level of populations. Biopolitics focuses on living beings rather than on legal subjects, - or, to be more precise, it deals with legal subjects that are at the same time living beings. Furthermore, biopolitics cannot be reduced to politics in the classical sense of individual or collective actors linked to more or less precise objectives and interests. The reasons for this are twofold. On the one hand, there are many unintended consequences of action to be taken

into account.⁴ On the other hand, biopolitical phenomena cannot be limited to actions or the consequences of action; they also include, as I shall show, forms of knowledge, communication structures and modes of subjectivation.

Against the naturalist and the politicist reading I will propose a relational and historical notion of biopolitics that was first developed by the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. According to Foucault, life denotes neither the basis nor the object of politics. Instead, it presents a border to politics – a border that should be simultaneously respected and overcome, one that seems to be both natural and given but also artificial and transformable. “Biopolitics” in Foucault’s work signals a break in the order of politics: “the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques” (1980, 141f). Foucault’s concept of biopolitics assumes the dissociation and abstraction of life from its concrete physical bearers. The object of biopolitics is not singular human beings, but their biological features measured and aggregated on the level of populations. This procedure makes it possible to define norms, establish standards, and determine average values. As a result “life” has become an independent, objective and measurable factor and a collective reality that can be epistemologically and practically separated from concrete living beings and the singularity of individual experience.

From this perspective, the notion of biopolitics refers to the emergence of a specific political knowledge and new disciplines such as statistics, demography, epidemiology and biology. These disciplines make it possible to analyse processes of life on the level of populations and to “govern” individuals and collectives by practices of correction, exclusion, normalisation, disciplining, therapeutics and optimisation. Foucault stresses that in the context of a government of living beings, nature does not represent an autonomous domain that has to be respected by governmental action but depends on the practices of government itself. Nature is not a material substratum to which practices of government are applied, but the permanent correlative of those practices. A decisive role in this context is played by the ambivalent status of the political figure “population”. On the one hand population represents a collective reality that is in principle not dependent on political intervention but is characterised by its own dynamics and modes of self-regulation; this autonomy, on the other hand, does not imply an absolute limit to political intervention but is on the contrary the privileged reference of those interventions. The discovery of a “nature” of the population (e.g. rates of birth and death, diseases etc. that might be influenced by specific incentives and measures) is the pre-

⁴ The pertinent example in this context is the fact that individual reproductive decisions and the use of prenatal diagnostics could aggregate in “eugenic” effects at a population level.

condition for directing and managing it. The third chapter discusses the different dimensions of the notion of biopolitics in the work of Foucault, and in the following chapters I present lines of reception and proposals for correction emanating from Foucault's concept of biopolitics.

Giorgio Agamben's writings and the works of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri are certainly the most prominent contributions to a reformulation of Foucault's notion of biopolitics. Both theories assign a strategic role to processes of demarcation and delimitation. According to Agamben it is the principal separation of "bare life" – the form of existence reduced to biological functions – and political existence that has shaped Western political history since Antiquity. He argues that the constitution of sovereign power requires the production of a biopolitical body, and that the institutionalisation of law is inseparably connected to the exposure of "bare life". Hardt and Negri diagnose a new stage of capitalism that is characterised by the dissolution of the borders between economy and politics, production and reproduction. While Agamben criticises Foucault for neglecting the fact that modern biopolitics rests on the solid basis of a pre-modern sovereign power, Hardt and Negri hold that Foucault did not recognise the transformation of modern into post-modern biopolitics. Their respective contributions to the discussion will be analysed in chapters 4 and 5.

The following chapters examine two main lines of reception which have taken up Foucault's work on biopolitics. The first focuses on the *mode of politics*, pursuing the question of how biopolitics is to be distinguished historically and analytically from "classical" forms of political representation and articulation. I concentrate on a discussion of the works of Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, who observe a regression of politics resulting from the increasing significance of biopolitical issues. In the following sections, I present Anthony Giddens's concept of life-politics (which does not explicitly refer to Foucault) and Didier Fassin's idea of bio-legitimacy (chapter 6).

The second strand of thought focuses on the *substance of life*. Scholars working on these lines ask whether the foundations, means and objectives of biopolitical interventions have been transformed by a biotechnologically enhanced access to processes of life and the human body (chapter 7). Looking more closely at the work of these scholars, I discuss concepts of molecular politics, thanato-politics, and anthropo-politics and the ideas of "biosociality" (Paul Rabinow) and "etho-politics" (Nikolas Rose).

Chapter 9 is devoted to a neglected area of biopolitics. It presents a series of theoretical concepts which entail that biopolitics cannot be separated from the economisation of life. The approaches covered include the idea of an "economy of humans" (*Menschenökonomie*)

developed by the Austrian social theorist and sociologist Rudolf Goldscheid at the beginning of the 20th century. This is followed by the concept of a “vital politics” as promoted by German liberals after World War II, and the theory of human capital developed by the Chicago School. The final part focuses on visions of a “bioeconomy” in contemporary political action plans. The book also presents some recent empirical studies that critically evaluate the relations between biotechnological innovations and transformations of capitalism. The last chapter integrates the diverse refinements and corrections of the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics into an “analytics of biopolitics”. I seek to demonstrate the theoretical importance of this research perspective. Finally, I show how this analytical framework differs from bioethical discourse.

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