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Biopolitics and beyond. On the reception of a vital Foucauldian notion

Until recently, the term "biopolitics" as developed by Michel Foucault was unknown beyond a group of experts and scholars. As Foucault understood it, the term designates what "brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life" (Foucault 1979: 143). He distinguished historically and analytically between two dimensions of this "power to life", namely between the disciplining of the individual body, on the one hand, and the social regulation of the body of the population, on the other. According to Foucault, biopolitics marks the threshold of modernity since it places life at the center of political order. In this theoretical perspective, there is an intimate link between the constitution of a capitalist society and the birth of biopolitics: "Society's control over individuals was accomplished not only through consciousness or ideology but also in the body and with the body. For capitalist society, it was biopolitics, the biological, the corporal, that mattered more than anything else" (Foucault 2000a 137). Furthermore, Foucault's introduction of the concept of biopolitics signals a theoretical critique of the "juridico-discursive" model of power (Foucault 1979: 82). According to this model, power is exercised as interdiction and repression in a framework of law and legality resting ultimately on the problem of sovereignty. In contrast, Foucault uses the notion of biopolitics to stress the productive capacity of power that cannot be reduced to the ancient sovereign "right of death". While sovereignty mainly operated as a "subtraction mechanism" that seized hold of life in order to suppress it, the new life-administering power is dedicated to inciting, reinforcing, monitoring and optimizing the forces under its control (see Foucault 1979).

Let us note that Foucault did not invent the notion of biopolitics.[i] It figured already in the first half of the 20th century in texts on the regulation and policing of life and race, most prominently in books and articles by the National-Socialists in Germany.[ii] A bit later, at the

end of the 1960s, a new field of research was established in Anglo-American political science under the heading of "biopolitics". This theoretical approach is grounded in the belief that in order to analyse political structures and processes, we need to take up research from the biology of behavior, socio-biological concepts and evolutionary theory (Carmen 1997 Somit/Peterson 1998; for a critique see Euchner 2001; Strube 2001).

In Foucault's work, biopolitics marks an explicit rupture with any endeavour to reduce the nature of politics to biology. On the contrary, biopolitics is introduced as a notion that accounts for a historical process in which life appears as the object of political strategies. Instead of departing from natural and universal laws that guide politics, Foucault's notion of biopolitics marks a historical shift, a discontinuity in political practice. While today the term "biopolitics" is used in scientific literature and journalistic texts mostly as a neutral notion or a general category to point out the social and political implications of biotechnological interventions (Geyer 2001; Gerhardt 2002; Mietzsch 2002), there has been a quite remarkable reception of the Foucauldian work on biopolitics in the past years.[iii] Grossly, it is possible to distinguish two main lines of reception. The first is dominant in philosophy and social theory. It inquires into the mode of politics that biopolitics represents: How does it work and what forces does it mobilize? How is it to be distinguished historically and analytically from other forms of politics today and in the past? The second line of reception originates in the social studies of science and technology, in the history of science, medical anthropology, but also in feminist theory and gender studies. The starting point in this theoretical strand is the observation that living bodies are less conceived as natural organisms but as artificial beings that are open to technological decomposition and recombination. Here the question arises: What is the substance of life?

In this article I will critically analyse the two lines of reception. After a short review and an outline of major theoretical achievements of the respective approaches, I will endorse a third perspective in the remaining part of my contribution. My proposal is to combine the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics with his analytics of government. This theoretical coupling will allow to better understanding the relationship between biopolitical modes of government and liberal political rationalities.

1. Bare life or living multitude: What is politics?

What concern the first line of reception, I will only refer to the two extreme points of this discussion, which are also the most prominent contributions to this debate: the concept of biopolitics in the work of Giorgio Agamben on the one hand and that in the works of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri on the other.[iv] The two approaches differ significantly in their critique of Foucault. In contrast to Foucault, Agamben holds that modern biopolitics rests on the solid basis of pre-modern sovereign power, while Hardt and Negri on the contrary claim that Foucault did not sufficiently pay attention to the transformation of a modern to a postmodern biopolitics.

Let's start with the conception that holds that there is no outside of biopower since biopolitics cannot escape biopower. Relying on the works of Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger and George Bataille, Giorgio Agamben's point of departure is a conceptual distinction that according to him characterises Western political tradition since Greek antiquity. He states that the main line of separation is not the difference between friend and enemy, but the distinction between bare life (*zoé*) and political existence (*bíos*), between the natural existence and the legal status of a human being. Agamben claims that the constitution of sovereign power requires the production of a biopolitical body. He holds that the institutionalisation of law is inseparably connected to the exposure of "bare life". In this light, the inclusion into a political community seems only possible by the simultaneous exclusion of some human beings who are not allowed to become full legal subjects. At the beginning of all politics we find – according to Agamben – the establishment of a borderline and the inauguration of a space that is deprived of the protection of the law: "The original political relation is the ban" (Agamben 1998: 181).

Agamben denotes this secret foundation of sovereignty with a figure from archaic Roman law. "Homo sacer" designated an individual whom the political community deemed worthy of death, but whom it bans from either being legally executed or religiously sacrificed. If he or she was killed by someone, the person won't face prosecution. While even a criminal could claim certain legal guarantees and formal procedures, this "sacred man" was completely unprotected and reduced to mere physical existence. Since he or she was ascribed a status beyond human and divine law, homo sacer became some kind of "living dead".

Agamben's main thesis is that the camp is "the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity" (1998: 123). For him the camp is less a physical entity surrounded by fences and material borderlines, but it symbolizes and fixes the border between bare life and political existence. The problem is that he does not comprehend "camp" as an internally differentiated continuum, but only as a "line" (1998: 122) that separates more or less clearly between bare

life and political existence. As a consequence, he cannot analyse how inside "bare life" hierarchisations and evaluations become possible, how life can be classified and qualified as higher or lower, as descending or ascending. Agamben cannot account for these processes since his attention is fixed on the establishment of a border – a border that he does not comprehend as a staggered zone but as a line without extension that reduces the question to an either-or. In other words: Agamben is less interested in life than in its "bareness", whereby his account does not focus on the normalisation of life, but on death as the materialisation of a borderline. For Agamben biopolitics is essentially "thanatopolitics" (1998: 122; Fitzpatrick 2001: 263-265; Werber 2002: 419).[v]

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri endorse an entirely different account of biopolitics. They try to give biopolitics a positive meaning. By synthesizing ideas from Italian Autonomist Marxism with poststructural theories, they claim that the borderline between economics and politics, reproduction and production is dissolving. Biopolitics signals a new era of capitalist production where life is no longer limited to the domain of reproduction or subordinated to the working process: "The subjectivity of living labour reveals, simply and directly in the struggle over the senses of language and technology, that when one speaks of a collective means of the constitution of a new world, one is speaking of the connection between the power of life and its political organisation. The political, the social, the economic, and the vital here all dwell together" (Hardt/Negri 2000: 405-6; see also 22-41). In Hardt and Negri's account the constitution of political relations now encompasses the entire life of the individual, which prepares the ground for a new revolutionary subject: the multitude.[vi]

The biopolitical order that is presented by Hardt and Negri, does also include the material conditions for forms of associative cooperation that will transcend the structural constrains of capitalist production. Biopolitics is the name they give to a whole bundle of empirical ruptures and displacements. According to Hardt and Negri this plural dissolution of borderlines represents the transformation from modernity to post modernity, from imperialism to empire. This diagnosis founds the perspective of immanence that guides the authors in their analysis. If economy and politics, material production and ideological legitimating do collapse, there will be no more external point of life or truth that is able to confront empire. Empire will create the world it inhabits: "Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it. Power can achieve an effective command over the entire life of the population only when it becomes in integral, vital function that every individual embraces and reactivates of his or her accord" (Hardt/Negri 2000: 23-4).

While in Agamben's account resistance is not part of biopolitics but always already subsumed under sovereign power[vii], Hardt and Negri differentiate between biopower and biopolitics. While the entire society is controlled by capital, the authors combine this sober diagnosis with a revolutionary promise. Indeed, the authors argue that the absence of an outside to capitalism and its communist overthrow are part of the same process, which is driven by the singular subjectivities of 'living labour'. If biopower represents the power over life, then it is life that constitutes the terrain where counter-powers and forms of resistance are formed and moulded. Biopolitics is not only opposed to biopower but precedes biopower in ontological terms. Biopower reacts to a vivid and creative force that remains outside of it, that it regulates and moulds without being identical to it. Here biopolitics points to the possibility of a new ontology that is founded in the body and its powers (Lazzarato 2000; Revel 2004).

2. Molecular-politics, anthropo-politics, thanato-politics: What is life?

The second line of reception is more empirically oriented and takes up recent developments in biomedicine and in the biosciences that allow manipulating "life itself" (Franklin 2000).Their common point of departure is the conviction that the idea of a common natural origin of all living beings is replaced by the concept of an artificial plurality of beings that resemble more technical artefacts than natural entities. The redefinition of life as text in molecular biology, the progress in transplantation medicine and reproductive technologies, new visualisation techniques from PET-scans to DNA-analysis, – to name only a few technological innovations – break with the concept of an integral body. The body is less conceived as an organic substance and more like molecular software that may be read and rewritten. In the words of Sarah Franklin and Margaret Lock: "Genealogical succession is to the new biology what a live orchestra is to digital recording" (2003: 14; see also Heins/Flitner 1998).[viii]

Molecularisation and digitalisation characterise a "recombinant biopolitics" (Dillon/Read 2001) that operates at the same time below and beyond bodily borderlines. It opens up new spaces of intervention inside the human body and allows at the same time new combinations of heterogeneous elements to hitherto unknown life forms. As Hans-Jörg Rheinberger emphasized the practice of molecular engineering differs substantially from traditional forms of intervention in the biosciences and in medicine: It aims not only at the modification of

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metabolic processes but also at their reprogramming: "For the first time, it is on the level of *instruction* that metabolic processes are becoming susceptible to manipulation. Until that point was reached, medical intervention, even it its most intrusive physical, chemical and pharmacological forms, was restricted to the level of metabolic *performance*." (Rheinberger 1996, S. 25). In this political epistemology of life biology is no longer comprehended as a science of discovery but operates as a transformative knowledge that creates life and transforms living beings (Rabinow 1996; Rose 2001; Clarke et al. 2003).

This instrumentalisation of life is closely connected to its capitalisation. While nature used to be exploited as raw material for production processes, today in the age of genetic diversity and sustainable development nature is conceived of as source and creator of "value". Processes of reproduction und transformation of life are expected to generate "biovalue"[ix], they form the basis for the development of new products and services inside a capitalist economy. Biological knowledge and life forms can be patented and marketed. In this political economy of life life value and capitalist value production form an organic combination (Haraway 1991; Escobar 1996; Andrews/Nelkin 1998).

Three forms of critique and correction addressing the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics follow from this transformation.

(1) Firstly, we need to note that Foucault's concept of biopolitics remains attached to the idea of an integral body. His analysis of power techniques that are directed on the body to form and fragment it, are still relying on the idea of fixed and identifiable bodily borders. Today, this idea encounters several difficulties. The body as a self evident point of departure and organic substrate that technologies address to form and modify is now conceived as result of technologies, as effect of technologies of embodiment (de Laureatis 1987; Haraway 1991; Butler 1993). Molecular biology established a new level of intervention beyond the classical biopolitical poles "individual" and "population". A molecular-politics that allows for a genetic gaze on the individuals supplements the anatomo-politics and the regulation of the population. It offers individual genetic profiles while locating them at the same time inside a collective gene pool (Flower/Heath 1993).

(2) Secondly, the technologies of dissociation and recombination of the body lead to a new relationship between life and death. Although in *The Birth of the Clinic* Foucault treats death as an integral part of modern medicine, in other texts he seems to assume that it marks the exterior border and the other side of biopolitics. In contrast to that view we have to state that life and death are much more systematically coupled than

Foucault imagined. On the one hand, human material, i.e. bodily parts, transcend the living subject. Even when their "original" bearers are dead, cells, organs, blood, marrow etc. of a human being can exist in the bodies of other human beings, whose "quality of life" they might enhance or whose death they may delay. The life material does not obey the same biological rhythms as the organic body, it can be stored as information, deposited in biobanks or cultivated in stem cell lines, which are in principal immortal (Iacub 2001). As a consequence, death can be exploited, it can be used to optimise and prolong life inside a productive circle: the death of some may guarantee life and survival of others. On the other hand death is fragmented and made flexible. The invention of the concept of brain death and the development of techniques of re-animation are followed by the disintegration of death into different bodily regions and time periods. This process allowed for the development and expansion of transplantation medicine. Today, it is less the sovereign state than the medical-administrative authorities that decide over life and death, defining what (human) life is, when it starts and ends. In a completely new sense thanoto-politics is a part of biopolitics.

(3) Thirdly, in Foucault's work biopolitics remains centred on human individuals and populations (even if he proclaims the "death of man" in *The Order of Things*). This anthropocentric privilege of mankind is quite debateable for at least two reasons. Such an approach cannot address the question how ecological management and environmental discourses relate to the (re-)production of the human species. Therefore, it is necessary to extend the notion of biopolitics to the administration and control of the conditions of life in general (Rutherford 1999). Furthermore, the reconfiguration of bodies as texts dissolves the epistemological and normative borderline between humans and non-humans (see Latour 1993). If life could be reduced to genomic structures and processes, there are only differences of degree, but no differences in principle, between man and other forms of life. In this new biopolitical constellation living beings do not possess a perfect form or an inner kernel. From the four bases of the DNA an endless plurality of life forms may be generated. The optimised man – man who lives longer or is less susceptible to illness – that is envisioned by biomedical and biotechnological strategies is at the same time an animal. The talk of "model organisms" is quite telling in this respect since it is mice, sheep, apes and other animals that are used in biomedicine and scientific research to study human diseases (see Rabinow 1996: 91-2). In this perspective mankind no

longer appears as the solid outcome of natural processes but as the precarious effect of a technological process and as the object of social conflicts and cultural meanings: Biopolitics as anthropo-politics.

3. Vital-Politics: The government of life

The two lines of reception may be presented very briefly as follows: On the one hand it is clear that beyond and below the individual and population levels there is a new dimension of biopolitics that relies on an expanding knowledge of the body and biological processes. On the other hand it proves necessary to stretch the analysis of biopolitics to include processes of subjectivation in order to comprehend how inside a biopolitical mode of production new individual and collective actors are arising. Thus, the analysis of biopolitics is expanded towards an understanding of subjectivation processes and knowledge production.

While this is certainly an advantage compared to Foucault's original reading of biopolitics we might also feel a certain uneasiness. The two lines of reception that I just reviewed seem to represent two parallel endeavours to conceptualise biopolitics without confronting each other, without taking into account the perspective of the other.[x] They remain isolated attempts that rehearse a quite traditional but questionable division of labour. One the one side we find politics or the macro level where fundamental questions on power and resistance, subjectivity and ideology are formulated; on the other side we find an engagement with technologies, daily practices and the micro-level, often in distance or even in separation from politics. The danger we face is a mutual blindness: while the first strand might analyse political processes without taking into account material technologies, the second might be tempted to analyse technological developments isolated from political strategies. [xi]

Ironically, it is in Foucault's work that we find already an effort to confront this problem and a hint how to solve it. To start with, Foucault's notion of political technology exactly tries to combine the two perspectives that I just mentioned. It stresses the material side of politics and claims at the same time that technology is not to be comprehended as a neutral device but must be analysed in a political context. But there is an even more important theoretical achievement that was put forward by Foucault: his work on governmentality. Foucault uses the notion of government in a comprehensive sense that takes up the older meaning of the term stressing on the one hand the close link between forms of power and processes of subjectification; on the other hand his work on government also indicates that it is not

possible to study technologies of power without an analysis of the forms of knowledge underpinning them. In this perspective, governmentality stresses the close link between power procedures, technologies of subjectivation and forms of knowledge (Foucault 1991; Foucault 2004a; Foucault 2004b). While the two lines of reception that I just reviewed concentrate in their analysis either on subjectivation processes or on forms of knowledge, I will argue for a third perspective of analysis that opens up a systematic confrontation between biopolitics and governmentality.

My proposal is to analyse biopolitics as an "art of government" (Foucault 2004b, p. 4). This perspective allows us to give up some limitations that characterise the notion of biopolitics in Foucault's work. It is possible, also, that his interest in governmentality is linked to his own determination to overcome those shortcomings. Biopolitics in Foucault's work is centered on the biological and physical life of a population and is reduced to body politics. The concept of governmentality brings into view the manner in which the moral and political integrity of the social must be produced and preserved. It extends the perspective of body politics by introducing the element of "vital politics". In his lecture on modern neoliberalism (the title of the lecture is "the birth of biopolitics") Foucault refers to the ordo-liberal Alexander Rüstow who describes vital politics as: "a politics of life that […] takes into account the entire situation of life of the worker, his real and concrete situation, from the morning till the evening, from the evening till the morning." (Foucault 2004b: 164; translation T.L.).

In rearticulating the concept of biopolitics from within an analytics of government, biopolitics does not only include the physical being, but also its moral and political existence. This brings us back to Agamben's distinction between *bíos* and *zoé* (which was originally developed by Hannah Arendt). Following a proposition by Lars Larsen (2003) it is possible to distinguish not only between two subject forms of biopolitics: individual and population but also between two life forms: *zoé* and *bíos*, the physical and the moral-political existence. This distinction allows asking how these four dimensions of biopolitics are articulated with each other. While Foucault's notion of biopolitics in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* focuses on individual disciplining and the regulation of population processes – hence the *zoé*-dimension, the problematics of government raises more explicitly moral and political questions: the problem of *bios.* Beyond technologies that work on the individual or collective body, the perspective of governmentality addresses the workings of "technologies of the self" and "political technologies of individuals". While the first concentrate on processes of self-government, the ways in which subjects relate to themselves as ethical beings, the later denote "the way by which […] we have been led to recognize ourselves as a society, as a part of a

social entity, as a part of a nation or a state". (Foucault 2000b: 404). On the basis of this theoretical reorientation it is possible to discern four interrelated biopolitical dimensions. The "classical" repertoire of body and population technologies is augmented by the analysis of technologies of the self and social technologies.[xii]

This theoretical refinement allows to adequately addressing the problematics of biopolitics. For Foucault modern biopolitics is a mixture of political and pastoral power that goes back to ancient Christianity. He insists that "biopolitics" as we know it is characteristic of the liberal form of government that represents a specific combination of *zoé* and *bios*. Only with liberalism – as Foucault puts it in his lectures on governmentality – the question arises how one governs free subjects that are at the same time living beings. He stresses that the problems of biopolitics "cannot be separated from the frame of political rationality, in which they appeared and were aggravated. Especially not from 'liberalism', since by referring to this rationality they got the form of a provocation. How can the phenomenon of the 'population' with its specific effects and problems be taken into account by a system that endorses the respect for a subject of rights and for the freedom of choice? In whose name and by what rules may they be governed?" (Foucault 1994: 818, translation T.L.; see also 822-3).

The combination of the concept of biopolitics with an analytics of government offers at least two new perspectives for further research. Firstly, it would open up empirical investigation into historical forms of articulation between physical being and moral-political existence: How and when do certain forms of objectivation and bodily experiences become a moral, political or legal problem? This is the theme of Foucault's last works on the "history of sexuality". A more recent example is the figure of man or the legal construct "human dignity", which is getting more and more fragile as a result of biotechnological interventions: do stem cells qualify for human dignity, and if so could they claim human rights? (see Rabinow 1999: 14-17). Furthermore: What are the "natural foundations" of national identities? What relationship exists between biological characteristics and questions of citizenship? (see Rose/Novas 2005).

Secondly, such a perspective would render visible the political quality of biotechnological interventions: how do present forms of government rely on forms of guidance and self-guidance of the *bíos*? How do they contribute to the establishment of a legal and moral infrastructure to propose and outline certain modes of application and forms of use? What is the relationship between the concept of a free, self-responsible and autonomous subject and the neoliberal idea of human life as capital?

4. Conclusion

In this paper I laid out the main lines of reception of the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, distinguishing between approaches that centre on the question of politics and those that take the problem of life as a starting point. I reviewed very briefly the respective critiques and corrections they propose towards the Foucauldian concept. In the third part I briefly pointed to some limitations of these endeavours. In remaining isolated, they don't take each other's work into account, and thereby tend to prolong traditional intellectual and academic divisions of labour. By separating politics and technology, macro- and micro-level they miss important aspects of contemporary biopolitics.

My proposal endorses a third perspective on biopolitics that goes back to Foucault's original work on governmentality. By rearticulating biopolitics in an analytics of government it will be possible to formulate a whole range of important questions that are mostly left outside of scientific inquiry and political discussion. As Foucault tried to do, we have to analyse more closely the inner link between liberalism and biopolitics: "When we understand what characterises the system of government that we call liberalism, […] we will also conceive what biopolitics is" (Foucault 2004b: 24, translation T.L.).

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[i]   Many authors wrongly believe that the notion originated in Foucault's work (see e.g. Jean-Nancy Nancy 2002, p. 137).

[ii]   For early texts that introduce the notion see Karl Binding, *Zum Werden und Leben der Staaten*, München und Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot 1920; Eberhard Dennert, *Der Staat als lebendiger Organismus*, Halle: Müller Verlag 1922; Eduard Hahn*, Der Staat, ein Lebewesen,* München: Deutscher Volksverlag Boepple 1926. For a very good reconstruction of the concept of biopolitics see Esposito 2004, esp. pp. 3-39.

[iii]   Any discussion of Foucault's notion of biopolitics will be complicated by the distinct uses of the term in his work, or rather, the divergent accounts of the connection between biopolitics and biopower. While Foucault used biopolitics in some texts as a synonym for biopower; in others he conceived of biopolitics as the opposite of biopower since it denotes all strategies that resist biopower. But Foucault also talks of biopolitics when he refers to a particular dimension or pole of biopower. Biopolitics here means the regulation of a body politic, an entire population, in contrast to the "anatomo-politics" of individual discipline (see Rancière 2000; Revel 2004).

[iv]   See on this confrontation also Rancière 2000.

[v]   For a systematic comparison of Foucault's and Agamben's concept of biopolitics see Genel 2003; Lemke 2004.

[vi]   I commented on Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's concept of biopolitics elsewhere (see Lemke 2002).

[vii]   This is at least the argument in *Homo Sacer*. For a different account where Agamben discusses resistance to sovereign power see the essay "Forms of Life" (Agamben 1998b).

[viii] As a consequence, it is possible to differentiate between two meanings of life: The first denotes a transitory event ("Erlebnis") requiring physical presence, while the second can be stored, copied, re-arranged and optimised (see Schrage 2003).

[ix]   See Waldby 2000, p. 33: "My term biovalue [...] specifies ways in which technics can intensify and multiply force and forms of vitality of ordering it as an economy, a calculable and hierarchical system of value. Biovalue is generated whereever the generative and transformative productivity of living entities can be instrumentalised along lines which make them useful for human projects – science, industry, medicine, agriculture or other arenas of technical culture. Currently the most productive forms of biovalue emerge from the calibration of living entities as code, enrolling them within bio-informatic economies of value which converge with capital economies."

[x]   Though it has to be noted that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri do refer to the work of Donna Haraway in *Empire* and to question s of biotechnology in their recent book *Multitude* (2004).

[xi]   Cf. Andrew Barry on this point: „Science and technology studies have tended to be dominated by the study of ‚cases' which become the objects of theoretical arguments about the character of the scientific and technical, but whose significance for the study of politics is obscure. In this way, the connections between science, technology and politics are not interrogated but reproduced" (Barry 2001, S. 12). For a similar critique see Gottweis 1998, S. 11.
This critique obviously only applies to the mainstream of science and technology studies. For a classical text in this theoretical tradition that questions the very distinction between micro- and macrolevel, politics and technology see Callon/Latour 1981.

[xii]   See e.g. Barbara Cruikshank (1999) on „technologies of citizenship".