Michel Foucault on Bio-power and Biopolitics

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Foucault studied roughly the in 1980s by which he means “the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations.” (1984a, 264). Further in this study we will see that bio-power and biopolitics are intertwined with all these three modes of subjectivation – albeit Foucault's 1975-76 works deal mostly with the two former, whereas starting from the lectures 1977-78 Foucault begins to pay more attention on the third field of objectification as well.

By concepts of bio-power and biopolitics I will mean the following: the former is a form of power that is oriented towards human beings as living members of a species with certain biological characteristics (2003, 249; 1978, 143). These characteristics may be studied scientifically and they can be affected through multiple interventions. Biopolitics then is a technology of power that consists in techniques (see below), practices and procedures that are aimed at organizing, regulating and governing the phenomena peculiar to life in the context of population (2003, 246-247). Life here must be understood as a process comprising of forces, energy and desires by which an organism persists in being, grows and reproduces. Bio-power is hence occupied with multiple life-related phenomena that affect the way human life develops, and which can be modified through interventions. However, bio-power should be understood as a name to designate the general and abstract force that is realized through biopolitics i.e. strategies to affect on all the things that depend on the biological. Thus biopolitics refers to the specific set of means, including techniques and knowledge, by which one aims to produce the biological in a specific form. However, the actual composition of biopolitics is always dependent on particular political rationalities and technologies according to which one aims to rationalize the phenomena characteristic to a living population. (cf. Foucault 1982b, 779-784; 2000a, 409-410).

However, it must be emphasized that our relation to life (and biology as a science of life) is always constituted by particular historical frameworks. These include, above all, cultural values and beliefs, scientific paradigms and technology, means to utilize natural resources etc. Thus according to Foucault it is not until the mid-18th century that a particular historical formation occurs which fulfills the proper relation between knowledge and power and can be called “the entry of life into
history, that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of power and knowledge, into the sphere of political techniques.” (Foucault 1978, 141-142). In this sense different forms of power may include bio-power for which the necessary condition is sufficient scientific knowledge of human biology and techniques for its modification.

Foucault often utilizes the concepts of technology and technique, which are closely linked to the functioning of power and different political rationalities (Foucault 1978, 141; 1995, 26; 2003, 246, 249; 2007, 8). In general terms we can define the former as a set of skills, practices and knowledge that are instruments for realizing a given object. The latter represents some of these specific skills by which one reaches towards the objective. In relation to these Foucault also uses notion of mechanism to designate a given technique or a procedure by which certain power effects are carried out in reality (2003, 32-33). When technologies and techniques are combined in order to produce certain mechanisms Foucault often uses the notion of apparatus (dispositive) to designate the whole machinery harnessed to produce particular effects (1978, 55-56, 84; 1995, 173,201-205).

In addition to the notion of apparatus in Security, Territory, Population Foucault (2007, 108, 193) introduces the concept of governmentality referring very broadly to technologies by which human conduct can be directed (cf. 1997c). In order to shed light on the characteristics of a given governmentality and the relation between governmental techniques and knowledge Foucault utilizes the notion of reflexive prism. This implies the reflective practice by which a given phenomenon or thing becomes an object of thought: how it is problematized or reflected by certain group or community of people, such as scientists, governors, theorists, advisors of governors, experts etc. By isolating a given reflexive prism Foucault is able to investigate from what kind of problematic an object under study has come into existence. In other words, what are the motives and aims behind practices by which a given thing becomes realized. Reflexive prism comes close to what Foucault later emphasized as problematization (problématization), that is, a certain form “that defines objects, rules of action, modes of relation to oneself.” (Foucault 1997c, 318). I hope that the readers now have a preliminary understanding of the key concepts and issues in this research. In the next chapter I
begin to analyze how Foucault presents biopolitics in relation to discipline in the framework of power over life.

### 2.2 Biopolitics in the Context of Power Over Life

From the early 1970s onwards Foucault was occupied with conceptualizing characteristics of what he called the normalizing society, and especially, how power functions in normalizing context (1978, 144; 2003, 24). In other words he was interested in the ways in which the plurality of human individuals becomes trained, modified and categorized within a system of norms and normalities. Furthermore, Foucault analyzed the ways in which the interplay between constructing norms and practices based on these norms reflect on social institutions. This included investigating the ways in which discourses and knowledge are produced and how they modify reality. Although Foucault introduces the notion of biopolitics already in a conference in Rio in 1974 (Esposito 2007, 27) he does not utilize the concept in his 1975 published *Discipline and Punish* (1995, hereafter DP) but only in the last chapter of *History of Sexuality Vol 1* (published in October 1976, hereafter HS). However, between these published works Foucault held a lecture series titled “*Society Must Be Defended*” (from January to March in 1976, hereafter SMD) in which bio-power and biopolitics are analyzed as part of the emerging biology-based racism thus constituting an integral part of the normalizing power.

I will apply Foucault’s notion of power over life which he mainly elaborated in the last chapter of HS to grasp how bio-power was deployed in managing life. However, in the aforementioned works Foucault approaches bio-power and discipline essentially as overlapping each other, and thus I will utilize this notion to designate the power apparatus that targets human life.

To put it very schematically, in DP Foucault presents the first formulations of power over life i.e. a form of power that differs significantly from other forms of power, such as pastoral and sovereign power. According to Foucault (1978, 140-
141; 1995, 25; 2003, 249) power over life is characterized by aims of modifying human life in order to render it both manageable and productive. In DP Foucault investigates techniques and practices through which individuals become subjected in different institutions, such as, prison, barracks, and labor camps. The crucial problem for Foucault to examine is how human body is rendered docile and useful in a context of a particular social system (1995, 163-169). In HS Foucault turns to investigate how sexuality has been used in different discursive systems and practices in order to produce particular power effects. There Foucault links sexuality with bio-power as one of its most important techniques. Thus power over life, on the one hand, consists in individualization and subjectivation through discipline and surveillance, and on the other, in regulation and manipulation of the overall qualities of population:

“In concrete terms, starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved in two basic forms; these forms were not antithetical, however; they constituted rather two poles of development linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations – – The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed.” (HS, 139).

I will begin with Foucault’s account of discipline. I emphasize that rather than aiming to produce a universal theory he wants to shed light on a local and particular development during which disciplinary practices swarmed into modern society (1995, 28-31, 209). After summarizing the crucial points of discipline I will tie this analysis to bio-power.

2.2.1 Two Technologies of Power: Discipline and Biopolitics

The discussion on the themes of DP and HS has been enormous until today. Thus I will only discuss the themes most important vis-à-vis biopolitics. As Fontana and Bertani (2003, 279) point out disciplinary power and bio-power have sometimes been seen as constituting different theories in Foucault's thought. This reading however, as they also stress (ibid.), is not supported by Foucault's texts. When analyzing power over life Foucault puts it very explicitly that this form of
power operates essentially within the frameworks of discipline and bio-power (1978, 139, 140-141), and further, that these different poles of the same power apparatus intersect through, for example, norms, sexuality and race.

In Foucault’s notion of power over life disciplinary and bio-power form the two poles of the same architecture of power. I will start with discipline and then connect that with bio-power. In general, Foucault’s point in DP is to show what kinds of procedures were linked to specifically modern forms of power. Foucault investigates the implications of the emergence of state apparatuses and social institutions, such as schools and workshops, which adopted disciplinary techniques as their primary means for realizing certain objectives. In order to question views which reduce power to ideology Foucault shows how power techniques penetrate human beings through practices and discourses (1995, 25; cf. 2003, 28). Furthermore, Foucault studies how the management from an individual to the population was actualized through establishment of norms and techniques that enabled production of a reality along these norms, especially in terms of labor effective individuals (1995, 163-169).

In DP Foucault stresses a methodological view what he calls micro-physics of power (1995, 26-31). According to this view power is essentially capillary (1978, 84): it flows from bottom to the top and is embodied in practices at every level of social relations. For Foucault human bodies are always part of political field where “power relations have an immediate hold upon it [the body]; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.” (DP, 25). However, these techniques directed to bodies are not reducible to violence, state apparatuses or ideologies but they may be much more subtle and non-violent. This is to say, the very power that subjects individual bodies constitutes an art through which individuals may be targeted towards preferred action. Thus we are dealing with “the political technology of the body” (ibid., 26), which includes knowledge that is not exactly knowledge of its functioning, but rather, knowledge of how to use it.

In brief, the objective of disciplinary power is to make individuals internalize certain roles and practices within a given framework. Domains and techniques
that disciplinary power exploits in the process of subjectivation are multiple and in DP Foucault makes many analytical enumerations and divisions between different disciplinary procedures and their aims. Here it suffice only to summarize the most important: above all, the purpose of disciplinary techniques is individualization and subjectivation. In order for discipline to be effective every human being needs to be distinguished from every other in their own singularity so that they can be investigated, manipulated and schooled as individuals. The effects of disciplinary power are produced especially through hierarchies, spacial divisions, control over daily rhythm, constant presence of either punishment or reward and norms and rules according to which individuals must conform (DP, 167).

Foucault’s main claim connected to discipline is that power does not simply repress: “In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.” (DP, 194). What interests Foucault then is “how multiple bodies, forces, energies, matters, desires, thoughts, and so on are gradually, progressively, actually and materially constituted as subjects, or as subject.” (2003, 28). In effect, this is what Foucault tried to show in his inquiries of the mid-1970’s: how certain forms of subjectivity come into existence instead of others. On what ground certain subjectivities are more legitimate, normal and desirable while others are marginalized or excluded. In what ways relations of power-knowledge affect to the ways in which the order of things is divided according to normal and abnormal. And finally, according to what kind of set of rules the relationship between subject and truth is realized (ibid., 25). However, the question is not only how power takes hold on individuals but on human life in general. In order to govern population one needs other techniques than solely disciplinary which is focused on individualization. Thus it is precisely at this point of our analysis that bio-power comes to complete power over life. Foucault writes:

“If one can apply the term bio-history to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of bio-power to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm
of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.” (HS, 143).

According to Foucault power over life started to appear during the 17th century, first in the form of disciplinary power, “an anatomo-politics of the human body” (HS, 139). Then somewhat later emerged a power that concentrated upon the species body with its characteristic phenomena including propagation, dying, illness, health, life expectancy, mortality rate, sexual behaviour etc. Moreover this power aims to manage all the things that can make the aforementioned phenomena to vary, such as, famine, scarcity, hygiene, medical techniques etc. This is what Foucault calls “a biopolitics of the population” (ibid.). In this process life is invested thoroughly and no more is power meant to manifest itself by taking lives as the former sovereign power did, but to establish a “calculated management of life” (ibid., 140). However, Foucault argues that the old sovereign apparatus did not disappear but that it had to adjust itself onto the new political-economic situation:

“[sovereign power] found itself unable to govern the economic and political body of a society that was undergoing both a demographic explosion and industrialization. So much that far too many things were escaping the old mechanism of the power of sovereignty, both at the top and at the bottom, both at the level of detail and at the mass level.” (SMD 2003, 249).

That is to say that the relations of power were fundamentally rearranged through and due to new types of scientific knowledges of human body and natural phenomena. All these developments in natural and human sciences rendered new ways of government and manipulation of human life possible. Foucault refers to this moment in history as the “threshold of modernity” i.e. the point in which man is no more what he was for Aristotle: “a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence” (1978, 143), but a member of a species that can be affected through a number of techniques. Furthermore, Foucault claims that

“—–this was nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is, 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.” (1978, 141).
What Foucault emphasizes here is the connection between power over life and the rise of capitalism. The era from Early-Modern to Modernity is of course full of phenomena with great historical importance, such as industrial take-offs, scientific and technical progress, birth of civil society and so forth, but in DP and HS Foucault seems to think that all these things were effects of the techniques deployed by power over life. Disciplinary and bio-power brought a radical shift in existing power relations based on sovereignty and feudal societal relations. Foucault writes:

"This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility; it had to have methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern.” (1978, 140-141.)

I must emphasize one crucial methodological point here. Although in DP, SMD and HS Foucault links power over life fundamentally with bourgeoisie thought, capitalist mode of production, emergence of modern human sciences and liberalism, he is not arguing that power over life was created by liberal bourgeoisie or capitalists because it served their interests – this would be too naïve view and simplifying explanation. On the contrary, for a variety of reasons it became possible to think people as population having some observable constants and as individuals possible to extract surplus value from. At the same time new techniques of power allowed or made it possible to produce productive subjectivities without making them more difficult to govern. New techniques of surveillance and scientific means made it possible to create new kinds of hierarchies and exclude certain types of individuals. (e.g. Foucault 2003, 32-33.)

Foucault continues by pointing out how discipline and bio-power function through norms. In order for power over life to carry out its regulatory and corrective mechanisms it will need an operational system of norms. Norm is