

Biopolitics



Giovanni Leghissa

Foucault is, among the philosophers who have flourished during the second half of the twentieth century, surely the most quoted. This fact can well explain why some key terms belonging to Foucault's conceptual toolbox have been creatively used, twisted, altered, and, of course, misunderstood in many different contexts, whereas some of the latter have nothing to do with the philosophical realm within which they arose. The notion of BIOPOLITICS is one of these key terms.

This notion is an original Foucault's coin and the reason that led him to create a new expression to designate how the LIFE of human beings has become the target of specific institutional interventions during the modern age is to be understood along with his broader attempt to elaborate a general theory of the processes of subjectivation. The point is crucial: since the beginning of his career as a scholar and philosopher, Foucault has been faced with the necessity to counter those interpretations of his work according to which the main topics of the latter were the question of power. Repeatedly, both in interviews and in lectures delivered at national or international symposia, he had to underline the fact that the analysis of power relations was a derived issue stemming from that what constituted the main focus of his interest, namely the question about how a subject becomes a subject. Individuals can acquire autonomy and independence, and thus shape their life according to their own tastes, desires and inclinations, not despite the presence of a given set of constraints, whose nature may be organizational and/or institutional, but precisely because the performativity of these constraints triggers different forms of reaction. Foucault's main assumption is that individuals are free, and that their freedom coincides with the capability they have to negotiate the settings within which to act, to move, to resist against orders that are perceived as unfair or unjust, to give voice to desires or needs, and to bring about substantial changes in the course of life. The notion of power

G. Leghissa (✉)

Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell'Educazione, Università degli Studi di Torino, Turin, Italy
e-mail: giovanni.leghissa@unito.it

ceases, in this way, to describe what happens when one is compelled to do something that one would have never done in absence of a given coercion. Power, in other words, is not to be understood as a top-down relation (see *POLITICAL THEOLOGY*). It would be also misleading to say that power relations “go through” each societal formation: power relations coincide, instead, with the whole of society insofar as they “cover” all the possible interactions among individuals, no matter if they act within institutions or within the private sphere. This does not mean, of course, that “power is everywhere”, but that the willingness to improve one’s own autonomy, or capability to shape one’s own life according to specific desires and aims, can grow and develop only in force of an uninterrupted process of bargaining. Individual freedom and autonomy are not a property of the subject, and they rather emerge from a force field that entails both the efficacy institutions may have to define boundaries within society and the capability individuals may have to shift them, or displace them differently (see *POLITICAL MORPHOLOGY*). In this sense, it is not surprising that Foucault devoted so much of his theoretical efforts to lay bare the strict intertwinement between power and knowledge—to the extent that “power/knowledge” has become a sort of formula designating the quintessence of Foucault’s philosophy. Differently from those—like Latour or Bloor—who are interested in showing that every piece of theory is not only laden with various biases of ideological nature, but also rests on the will to power of those who, within a given scientific community, try to maximize their gains in terms of prestige and influence, Foucault aimed at pointing out that knowledge is to be meant as a network of discourses that are supposed to be true and, therefore, grant for the presence of a last resort whenever shared mental models or systems of belief enter in conflict with each other. If knowledge is, thus, a concrete element of each social intercourse, discourses that drive, produce and reproduce knowledge possesses a sort of materiality for their own, in the sense that they are embedded in all the processes of subjectivation. Subjects—no matter whether they want it or not—are exposed not only to various forms of control, but also, and above all, to those *DEVICES*—Foucault terms them “dispositives”—whose function is to make each *FORM* of bargaining possible. The force of these dispositives—which include norms, rules, administrative measures, architectural *FORMS*, scientific statements, moral and philosophical discourses—is not a force that compels or coerces, it is rather a force that nudges to assume a specific behaviour: dispositives are, thus, architectures of choice that frame the space of manoeuvre within which subjects act and shape their life. And dispositives are imbued with discourse, and they are *DEVICES* whose texture is made of both chains of statements and *ARTEFACTS*.

Biopolitical dispositives are perhaps the most interesting example of what a dispositive is, in the sense that they are directly tailored to the basic and fundamental needs of individuals. They make institutional interventions on human life possible and their function is to improve, or enhance, the capability to act of all men and women who are part of a given population. The latter—and this a central element of Foucault’s argument—began to exist as a visible *PHENOMENON* only when public interventions aimed at controlling individual behaviour could extend their range of action thanks to the insights offered by a set of disciplines that allow for a better understanding of how individuals conduct their life, improve their wealth, get married, get

sick or die. The scope of biopolitical DEVICES is both to better collective welfare and to manage the differences among individuals (of status, gender, educational level, and so on) according to taxonomies and local rules in order to make these differences productive, no matter if individuals can perceive or understand the collective value of this final goal.

BIOPOLITICS, therefore, marks a shift between two forms of sovereignty. The first one, which has been effective from antiquity to the beginning of the modern age, consisted of the right to decide life and death. This right was, more precisely, the right to take life or let live. The second one, which has become prevalent when the modern state refined the modes of its action, performed a broader range of functions whose common denominator was the production of those forces that keep a population alive (Foucault 1978: 135f.). The form of power that characterizes BIOPOLITICS aligns itself with the exigencies of the administration of life. Thanks to biopolitical measures, in other words, it is the whole of the social body that ensures, maintains, and develops its own life. What must be correctly understood, here, is the intertwinement of control and enhancement: biopolitical interventions are effective only when they are tailored to specific and idiosyncratic traits of an individual or a group. Therefore, they must rest on a precise assessment of how individuals behave, think, and organize their life according to their needs and tastes. The bulk of data the modern state collects in order to track lifestyles, behaviours, the diffusion of group-specific pathologies, the bearing of ambient factors upon health, and so on, allows for planning, deploying, and improving those strategies that can, then, effectively steer collective and individual behaviours towards this or that direction. Once again, knowledge and power underpin each other: no steering of behaviours or lifestyles would be possible without the availability of data that result from the continuous and minute investigation of both individual preferences and their concrete expression.

Biopolitical interventions have undergone a twofold misunderstanding within those critical positions that lean on Foucault's philosophy. On the one hand, Marxists tend to place biopolitical interventions within the capitalist value-creating processes. On the other, there are interpretations of the notion of BIOPOLITICS—like those that rest on Agamben's philosophy—that tend to reduce BIOPOLITICS to the sheer fact that every FORM of power has to take into consideration the physical and biological properties of the subjects that are exposed to power; in this way, BIOPOLITICS becomes a term whose extension can be applied far beyond the context of western modernity, thus losing its heuristic validity. Foucault's notion of BIOPOLITICS is, on the contrary, thoroughly avaluative: it serves to describe what happens when networks of public institutions and enterprises cooperate together in order to govern the forces that keep a population alive within and outside the boundaries of modern nation states. Biopolitical practices are immanent, therefore, to the historical evolution of modern nation states, no matter whether they are ruled by a totalitarian regime or a liberal democracy. Of biopolitical nature are, for example, the different power technologies that made possible the extermination of Jews, gypsies, gays, and lesbians in Nazi Germany. Being the first function of racism to "fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower", it is easy to understand why racism became "the precondition that makes killing acceptable, that allows someone to be

killed, that allows others to be killed. Once the State functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the State” (Foucault 2003: 255f.). What explains the murderous function of racism is that its main scope is to justify the principle that the death of others makes one biologically stronger insofar as one is a member of a race or a population. But no less biopolitical are the power structures that characterize our contemporary neoliberal society, as Foucault showed in his Lectures delivered in the year 1978–1979 on the birth of BIOPOLITICS—a course that analyses the shift from classical liberalism to neoliberalism. When the truth of governmental practices comes from the discourse of economics, then the processes of subjectivation are shaped by a kind of rationality whose pivotal element is the *homo oeconomicus*. The latter indicates the path that individuals or even big collectives like a nation state or a company have to follow in order to improve their own welfare. The latter is an economic value, but not in the sense that it can be quantified in monetary terms or that it can be commodified. It is an economic value insofar as it reflects the efforts made by an agent to maximize a utility function; since what originates the preferences is no matter of discussion, all what an agent does in order to achieve a goal by using available means can be analysed and understood from the perspective of economics, and thus can become the target of biopolitical interventions. The political gain obtained thanks to the performativity of the latter consists of the possibility to reduce or even to erase the weight of a theory of justice within the practice of government: what counts are the outputs of those policies that improve the frame within which individuals act in order to maximize their preferences. A generalized regime of concurrence—whose shape and function are different from the market as it was understood within the classical economic theory—imposes itself both at the level of the imaginary and at the level of the everyday practices. The paradoxical result of the neoliberal FORM of government is that the promise of freedom, which shaped the project of modernity since the age of the enlightenment, can be fulfilled only thanks to the implementation of security: the enormous potential for conflicts within a society based on concurrence can be tamed and managed, in fact, only thanks to specific dispositives whose function is to control the material and symbolic space where social interactions take place. As Foucault states, “control is no longer just the necessary counterweight to freedom, as in the case of panopticism: it becomes its mainspring” (Foucault 2008: 67). Thus, despite its neutrality, Foucault’s notion of BIOPOLITICS reveals to possess a huge political relevance: it helps us uncover the totalitarian potential that is hidden in democratic regimes—and this relevance was surely not hidden to Foucault himself.

References

- Foucault, M.: *A History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. by R. Hurley. Pantheon Books, New York (1978)
- Foucault, M.: *Society must be defended*. In: *Id., Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, ed. by M. Bertani, A. Fontana, trans. by D. Macey. Picador, New York (2003)
- Foucault, M.: *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. by M. Senellart, trans. by G. Burchell. Palgrave Macmillan, New York (2008)