

# BIOPOLITICS - DEFINITIONS AND LINES OF DEVELOPMENT OF THEORETICAL REFLECTION

Franco Manti

University of Genoa

[franco.manti@unige.it](mailto:franco.manti@unige.it)

## THE 'PREHISTORY' OF BIOPOLITICS

The first who use the neologism biopolitics was M. Roberts. He argued that biopolitics allows you to have <<some biological means to identify the disorders politicians will have to deal with a scalpel >><sup>1</sup>. Sociologists, historians, politicians should consider the body that they want to describe and govern (the State) as a set of living tissues and buttons on which operate, when it is considered to be necessary, similarly to the way that occurs when facing pathologies<sup>2</sup>.

In 1960 the term *biopolitics* was used by A. Starobinski. He defined biopolitics as << an attempt to explain the history of civilization according to the rules of the basic cellular and biological life >><sup>3</sup>. This attempt is based on the idea that, if we admit the existence of purely organic forces that govern human societies and push masses, nations, civilizations against one other, we should also admit the existence of constructive and aware forces that can safeguard humanity and open optimistic new perspectives.

In 1968 *the Chaiers de la biopolitique* were published. Here biopolitics is defined as the science of the behavior of States and human communities, taking into account the laws, the natural environment and ontological data that support life and determine the activities of man. The task of biopolitics reflection is to recover the roots of societies and the sources from which they receive life and prosperity, in order to find their principle, essence and nature. In the vision proposed by the Chaiers, biopolitics is configured as a science and art of the use of knowledge according to the data provided by the laws of nature and ontology ruling our lives and destiny<sup>4</sup>.

The vision of Roberts was enlarged and reinterpreted by the International Political Science Association, which gave rise to the group of Americans Biopolitics<sup>5</sup>. They have developed, through time, a concept of biopolitics according to which political scientists should have appealed to

biology and, above all, to the neo-Darwinian theory of evolution to study, explain, predict and sometimes prescribe political behavior. Although it still reveals a biologicistic connotation, this theory emphasizes that the evolution of *homo sapiens* has provided him with an capability he does not have in common with other species, even with chimpanzees: the ability to create both religious and secular belief systems, and consequently to act against or in accordance with these systems, differently or contrary to his innate inclinations. In most cases, in fact, we obey to what we believe, rather than to our genes. In the long term, however, according to Biopoliticians, the evolutionary inheritance plays an important role, though not necessarily decisive, in shaping our political behavior and our social and political institutions<sup>6</sup>. Neo-evolutionism can therefore help to explain how and why political systems have developed. The difficulty that forms of democratic government have in imposing themselves would be due to the fact that humans, as social primates, have a natural bias toward an authoritarian conduct of life, based on their willingness to take a dominant behavior and form hierarchies. This bias is reinforced by the impulse to obedience. Situations of abundance, combined with another human trait, learning and increasing knowledge, may, in turn, promote the emergence and consolidation of democracies. On a methodological level, therefore, social sciences should be biologically oriented, as human behavior is significantly influenced by evolution<sup>7</sup>.

Another definition of the term *biopolitics* and its domain is M. Foucault's one. In 1976 he gave a course at the College de France, in which, within his reconnaissance on the origins of power, he identified the core of the systematic exercise of power in biopower. It is designed as power exercised on both individuals and species, on the activities of the body and, in general, the processes of life. The rationalization of politics induced by the modern State appeared to him as a practice of government directed to the life of individuals thought both as single and social body, and the determination of well-being, morality, work, social relationships, happiness, etc.. Biopolitics (*Naissance de la biopolitique*, was the topic of the course taught by Foucault in 1979) is presented, as a modernity product, of a centralized and bureaucratized State that rules his power on life in its various dimensions starting from corporeality itself. Biopolitics is, therefore, defined as an expression of the government strategies of individuals and society of which biopower uses as the primary foundation of the modern State. When the rationality of modern politics

relates with another modernity product, liberalism, the individualization/totalization, single/society dilemma emerges which, in its antinomic, has resulted, according to Foucault, the massacres of modern warfare, national racism, and genocide that constitute the extreme point that turns modern biopolitics into thanato-politics (i.e. politics of death)<sup>8</sup>.

### **AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL**

The vision of biopolitics developed by the Biopoliticians if, on the one hand, can help to give the right importance to the relationship between individuals - species - society, on the other is not agreeable when too biologically oriented. I do not think, in fact, we can reduce the study of political processes in large part, though not *in toto*, to the expression of inherited behaviours during the evolutionary process. As to Foucault's thought as well as the one of those who have variously interpreted and developed it, sometimes critically, I do not think that the relation between the modern State and liberalism produces what he asserts. Even with all the contradictions that can be found, liberalism has helped broaden the scope for individual freedom and, progressively, of citizenship. The thanato-politics has, conversely, a lot to do with dictatorships and, above all, totalitarianism, bitter enemies of liberalism. The fact that the evolution of liberalism has led to an increase in both individual freedom and state power may seem a paradox, only if you believe that power is a zero-sum game<sup>9</sup>. In addition, biopolitics is considered by Foucault as an 'expression of (bio) power, confusing the political decision-making mode with the historical-genealogical analysis of power and its development prospects.

I therefore propose the following definition of biopolitics, independent from that of (bio) power, but in relation with the process of political decision and its justification:

*Biopolitics is the systematic study of political decision-making mode and its justifications - with a particular reference to the loyal moral relationship among individuals, groups and communities, the formation of consensus, the determination of constitutionally relevant topics, the resources allocation strategies, the conflicts upholding, the conception of citizenship on life and health sciences, non-human animals, the ecosystem, through a methodology of interdisciplinary analysis.*

## **BIOETHICS AND BIOPOLITICS**

In today's pluralistic society, it is a fact the existence of moral conflicts and, together, the inability to reach a reasonable agreement on all controversial issues. This means that the politics-making process, in liberal-democratic societies is to combine the principle of majority with that of tolerance, in respect of the principle of political (not moral) neutrality, according to which in the presence of morally controversial ideas, a State must remain neutral, the laws must guarantee the rights of minorities to pursue their vision of the Good and be justified by political, not philosophical and ethical, issues. The determination of the specific domains of bioethics and biopolitics refers to the more general concerning the ethics and politics. At one level, biopolitics deliberating has the same problems as every other area of any political decision, that is to make decisions justified according to the principle of political neutrality. At a second level, there are more complicated issues induced by the novelty of the issues, the inadequacy of many interpretation categories that we inherit from our of ethical and political traditions. In addition, we must "come to terms" with the fact that, unlike other subjects of political decision, biopolitical ones bring into question our deep moral loyalty and, for this reason, must ensure, for each one, the conduct of their bodies, lives, ethical-professional commitments without any obligation to implement behaviour or undergo interventions in conflict with their vision of the Good. In short, for example, paying unaccepted taxes cannot be equated with being obliged, by law, to perform or undergo behaviours or actions that I consider immoral and contrary to my responsive vision of the Good. In the first case, for example, you cannot invoke conscientious objection (at least, in extreme cases, civil disobedience) while in the second one you can.

## **BIOPOLITICS AND DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP**

Bioethics moral dilemmas are a new frontier for the development of dialogue in a global perspective. Though bioethics can be considered a product of Western culture, many of its issues are common to all cultures and require political solutions globally agreed. Moreover, not only cultural but also religious traditions will increasingly have to deal with the moral questions posed by scientific discoveries and their possible biotechnological applications. The conflicting answers, already developed by different conceptions of bioethics, traditional cultures or religions, pose, at the same time, the need for the development of a reasonable dialogue in a public space

that the global economy and computer technologies contribute make more global and for a global governance capable, at a political level, of building a *modus vivendi* that can give life to supranational institutions, able to give compulsive normative directions to face issues such as biodiversity reduction, genetic screening of whole populations, piracy, genetic testing, placing of genetically modified foods on the market, organ trafficking, etc...

The biopolitical problems that characterize our current reality contribute to highlight the need for a serious discussion on how to govern the conflicts caused by the development of life sciences and planetary emergencies such as pollution, populations health, biodiversity reduction, etc. On issues so deeply affecting our and future generations' lives, one of the risks involved is the emergence of a kind of a new State paternalism. Today, a widespread awareness of the problems of bioethics that leads to a broad and profound debate, in the public and not only among the "insiders", still seems a long way off. This occurs in a kind of citizenship *deficit*, because its full expression cannot do without comparing, on an informed basis, with moral dilemmas caused by the development of life sciences. A real exercise of citizenship requires a controlling influence on the politics that affect our and future generations lives and the entire ecosystem.

Finally, in a world characterized by the weakness of national states sovereignty and the emergence, in economics as in politics, of supranational decision-making centres, it is necessary biopolitics to be able to deal with global emergencies exacerbated by the process of globalization. Public health and demographic policies, genetic screening of whole populations, the development and placing on the market of GMOs, the use of biotechnology, the possibility of intervention on the human genome, ecological concerns, pose unavoidable questions for a democratic governance. The biopolitics challenge that seems to appear in the near future is to develop a planetary citizenship, able to exert control and be proactive with respect to the political choices of states or supranational organizations, and help develop biopolitical proposals able to produce documents on the model of bill of rights and to design supranational institutions as "instruments" of global *governance*.

Though I do not consider pervasive biopower to be a necessary outcome of modernity, we cannot hide as a possible delegation, destitute of awareness and ability to control, from citizens to political power (as well as technocrats, specialists, scientists, etc. ) on life and death issues, would constitute a undesirable and even worrying perspective.

(Endnotes)

- 1 M. Roberts, *Bio-politics. An essay on the physiology, pathology, and politics on social and somatic organism*, Dent, London 1938, p. 130
- 2 Ivi, p. 214
- 3 A. Starobinski, *La biopolitique. Essai d'interprétation de l'histoire de l'humanité et des civilisations*, Des Arts, Genève 1960, p. 4
- 4 See Le temps de la biopolitique, in *Chaiers de la biopolitique*, 2, Paris 1968, pp. 4 - 5
- 5 The International Political Science Association organized, in January of 1975, a Conference in Paris, whose proceedings were published in A. Somit, (ed.), *Biology and Politics: Recent Explorations*, The Hague, Mouton 1976
- 6 See S. A. Peterson , A. Somit, Biopolitics in 2000 year,in ID.,*Research in Biopolitics. Evolutionary Approaches in the Behavioural Sciences: Toward a Better Understanding of Human Nature*, Jai Press, Greenwich, Connecticut, vol.8, 2001,p. 183
- 7 See A. Somit, S. A Peterson (Eds), *Evolutionary Approaches in the Behavioral Sciences*, in *Research in Biopolitics*, VIII, 2001
- 8 Foucault developed his thoughts on biopower and biopolitics in many works. Among these: *La volonté de savoir. Histoire de la sexualité*,I, Gallimard, Paris 1976;ID., *La gouvernabilité, Dits et écrits*, Edition établie sur la direction de D. Defer et F. Ewald, Gallimard, Paris 1994, Tome IV ; ID., *Il faut défendre la société . Cours au Collège de France. 1975 - 1976*, Gallimard–Seuil, Paris 1997; ID., *Sécurité, territoire et population. Cours au Collège de France 1977 -'78*, Gallimard–Seuil, Paris 2004
- 9 See C. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1987, p. 62; See, also, F.Manti, *Bíos e Pólis*, Genova University Press, Genova 2012, p. 219