



Theoretical Understanding of Biopower and Biopolitics

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ABSTRACT

Biopolitics as a term had been used in different connotations in various disciplines. It has been utilized in bioethics, medical ethics, political science and life sciences. The radical work is done by Michel Foucault in the conceptualization of biopower and biopolitics. He introduced the concept of biopower explaining the pervasiveness of power into the lives of individuals and populations as collective. The use of biopower and biopolitics interchangeably is the depiction of the diffused ways of power in the life processes. The fuzziness of these terminologies provide a lot of scope for its heuristic usage. In this paper I would like to argue that in contemporary period these two terms are synonymous. The power which is exerted over the combination of body and population through medical institutions and normalization process created to ascertain the deviation occurs.

KEYWORDS : biopolitics, biopower, foucault, theory

Introduction

Biopolitics as a term had been used in different connotations in various disciplines. But the main skeleton of this terminology is the effect of biological technologies on the human populations, individuals and societies (Darnovsky and Beitiks, 2014). The authors in their article have demonstrated the historical evolution of this term from the dialogue between bioethics and medical ethicists due to advancement in technologies in life sciences there had been a rise in conflicts between various stakeholders such as market, the state and civil society organizations (ibid). In another article, authors have described the utilization of this term in political science (Liesen and Walsh, 2011). The historical account of the application of biopolitics vary from Rudolph Kjellen in 1920s, for him state was considered as a "life form" which foreshadowed individuals and their discretions; term was used by Canadian Novelist and biologist Morley Roberts in his book named the same in 1938- discussed about the correlation between "biological phenomena and human political behavior" (ibid: 3). For certain period the usage of the term subsided but again in 1964, Lynton Caldwell in explaining the result of biological phenomena on public policies and the political phenomena (ibid). According to Somit, as quoted by Liesen and Walsh, the acclaim biopolitics as a term got through the Thomas L. Thorson's book, entitled Biopoliticsin which he addresses the behavior, politics, human nature, time and change in scientific understanding as limiting and implored the confrontations about "the scientific method within political science" (ibid: 5). In Europe too, during 1960s and 1970s many different meanings were attached to the term which basically dealt with the solution to environmental problems in terms of various dimensions of existence however these scholars also concentrated on consequences of biotechnology on the level of life, humans and their health (ibid).The radical work is done by Michel Foucault in the conceptualization of "biopower" and "biopolitics" (ibid) in mid 1970s (Lemke, 2011).

Biopower and Biopolitics – Michel Foucault

Foucault in History of Sexuality Vol. I introduced the concept of biopower explaining the pervasiveness of power into the lives of individuals and populations as collective. He has been analyzing the forms of power which are the result of deterioration of sovereign power (Taylor, 2011). Foucault inquired the result of the evolution of state apparatuses and social institutions, such as hospitals and schools, which applied certain techniques of discipline to conform individuals and populations and to explain how power techniques such as normalization seep into the social body through practices and discourses (Kristensen, 2013). The politics over life has become the core with the increase in emphasis in the administration and monitoring of populations (Basu, 2006). Due to wide variety of usage of these terms, it has become a 'black box' (ibid).

To examine this 'black box' in the present framework will be the focus of the researcher. The author intends to take the terms as used in the works of Foucault i.e. History of sexuality Vol.I (HS) (1976), Society

Must Be Defended (2003) and some other texts from propounders of Foucauldian understanding of these terms. But these two texts will form the basis of analysis of these terminologies.

In the last unit of HS, Foucault describes how the power of sovereign was accredited by violence. In order to explain the shift of power from declaring deaths to administering life, he gives examples of war which are organized for the population rather than the sovereign as an entity; death penalties¹ given became rare and the suicides which came in the sociological lens, for one's right² to die that is a crime in the law. According to him, administration over life worked at two poles which are coupled together; first, which works at the level of body and the second at the level of population. His primary emphasis was on the "concrete arrangements" of the abstract discourse of the Ideologists theory of signs, interpretations and common social interests. This amalgamation when studied together forms the basis for biopower which is the present configuration of disposition of power. But as he continues by justifying that it was not all rather reinforcement of the techniques of power at both the levels: capabilities of the body to be enhanced and extract as much as possible for the production and economic controls (anatomo-politics) and in order to keep this body machinery going on so as to control the 'species body' through various interferences at the life mechanisms (biopolitics).

Foucault explains the dialogue between the methods of power in the lectures of Society Must Be Defendedand in this last lecture of 17 March, 1976 that he uses the overlapping meanings of biopower, biopolitics and disciplinary power. In this lecture, he begins with how the power is being applied at the two levels but these levels do not exclude each other rather coherently work together. This 'biopolitics' according to Foucault, "...is applied not to man (sic)-as-body but to man (sic)-as-living-being" (ibid: 242). It is the application of power on the magnitude of the collective which forms the basis to understand this politics/power over life.

Foucault uses the term biopower as and when he is talking about the sovereign power and whenever he talks about the mechanisms of regulation of life processes, he uses the term 'biopolitics'. Following are some of the places where this argument can be situated:

From Society Must be Defended:

"...the power of sovereignty, and which consisted in the power to take life, we now have the emergence, with this technology of biopower, of this technology of power"(pg 247)

"Either it is sovereign and uses the atom bomb, and therefore cannot be power, biopower, or the power to guarantee life, as it has been ever since the nineteenth century. Or, at the opposite extreme, you no

longer have a sovereign right that is in excess of biopower” (pg 253)

“It is indeed the emergence of this biopower that inscribes it in the mechanisms of the State”(pg 254).

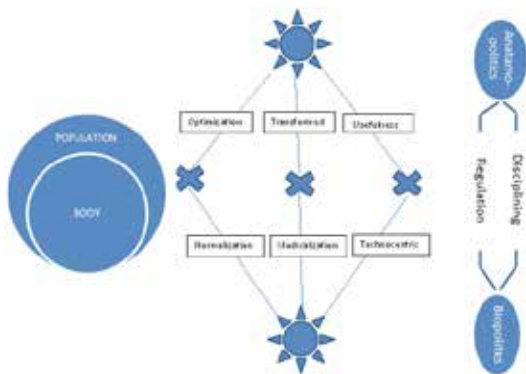
And Biopolitics is used in the following instances:

“It is these processes –the birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity, and so on –together with a whole series of related economic and political problems. . .become biopolitics’ first objects of knowledge and the target it seeks to control” (pg 243).

“The mechanisms introduced by biopolitics include forecasts, statistical estimates and overall measure” (pg 246).

The use of biopower and biopolitics interchangeably is the depiction of the diffused ways of power in the life processes i.e. as the nature of sovereign power changes to biopower. e the formation of networks enmeshed with power which in turn involves politics over life (biopolitics). And he himself talks about the ‘orthogonal articulation’ of disciplinary power and biopolitics. In the contemporary times, there cannot be a clear-cut distinction between biopower, biopolitics and anatomo-politics. The levels at which power work cannot be separated clearly in present times when body is claiming its authority and rights. Eg for PETA demonstrations body is being used to demand rights for animals. In similar fashion, the reconstructed normal body is demanding their position in society which an average person would need forming a heterogeneous population such as, jobs, equal place in public areas and so on.

Figure 1: Metaphase Stage of Biopolitics/Biopower



Source: Author, 2016

Table I illustrates the intersections of all the technologies and techniques of power as described by Foucault. But the contextual description of biopower, biopolitics and anatomo-politics gives the idea of a metaphase stage of cell division. In the metaphase stage, the chromosomes position themselves at the center attached with centrosomes at the poles with their microtubules which separate the chromosomes in the next cell division stage (anaphase). The bipolar action of the power, i.e. anatomo-politics and biopolitics as described by Foucault are the centrosomes which have their microtubules in the form of disciplinary and regulatory techniques of transformation, optimization, usefulness and normalization, medicalization, technocentrism respectively. The center positions of chromosomes depict the body and population which overlap each other and on whom power techniques work simultaneously and not differing at the level. As mentioned earlier, body has become the site for rights and authority alongwith asking for citizenship.

CONCLUSION

It has been highlighted the synonymous use of biopower and biopolitics by Foucault gives the vagueness which can be interpreted accordingly. In contemporary times, the distinction between biopower and biopolitics cannot be exercised with such demarcation. The power which is exerted over the combination of body and population

through medical institutions and normalization process created to ascertain the deviation, abnormality, pathological, disabled to happen.

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