

Biopolitics and Globalization

By Louisiana Lightsey | August 17, 2017

Biopolitics is a critical term used with some variation across the fields of political theory, international relations, cultural studies, critical sociology, and globalization studies. It is important to note that it has often been imbricated with the term “biopower” which Michel Foucault used non-discriminatorily as a synonym of biopolitics (Foucault 1990, 139-143). In this definition, biopower is a Western technology of power that utilizes biopolitics: the control of populations through apparatuses of normalization in order to maximize life processes. Contemporary interpretations of the concept seek to address ways in which globalization reiterates and complicates the Foucauldian notions of population, body, welfare, administration, politics, and capitalism.

Early Interpretations of Biopower and Biopolitics

In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault, analyzing how new advances in biology informed political control in the 19th and 20th century, defines biopower as the deployment of “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 1990, 140) and biopolitics as a technique of biopower that operates through “the regulatory control and series of interventions deployed in order to supervise the mechanics of life: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy, and longevity” (139). While biopolitics generally works to maximize life and the good of the population, it also acts as a factor of “segregation and social hierarchization, exerting [its] influence on the respective forces of both these movements, guaranteeing relations of domination and effects of hegemony” (Foucault 1990, 141). This is one aspect of biopower that always hides the potential to disallow life to the point of death (Foucault 1990, 138).

In his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Giorgio Agamben elaborates Foucault’s concept of biopower by synthesizing the Roman figure of law, *homo sacer*, and the Greek concepts of *bios*, political life, and *zoe*, bare life. He also universalizes the concept by unpinning it from any specific era (i.e., Foucault’s 18th and 19th centuries), claiming that biopower is the “hidden meaning of all forms of power from the ancient world to the present” (Rabinow & Rose 2006, 200). Agamben (Agamben 1998, 260) agrees with Foucault (Foucault 1990, 137) that the right of death, sovereign power, did not give way to biopower, but was always its counterpart, operating on the underbelly of administrative bureaucracy, and coalescing in its most visible configurations into atrocities such as the Holocaust.

More recently, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that all contemporary politics is biopolitics, a “form of power that regulates social life from its interior” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 23) and is “expressed as a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousness and bodies of the population” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 24). The authors extend Foucault’s conceptual framework to the global dominance of transnational corporations which “structure

global territories bio-politically” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 31) as well as to new forms of affective labor—“that produces or manipulates affects such as feelings of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt and Negri 2005, 108)—asserting that “immaterial labor is biopolitical” (Hardt and Negri 2005, 146). Hardt and Negri personalize Foucault’s framework further by making a delineation between biopower and biopolitics: the former is “what imperial sovereignty or Empire exercises as a “power-over” the forces of social production of the multitude” while biopolitics is “meant to capture and make sense of the movement of the multitude that, in its resistance to biopower, is gradually revealing itself as a ‘power-to’ produce a commonality that challenges the reactionary rule of biopower” (Dillon and Reid 2001, 65).

Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose critique Hardt and Negri’s application of biopolitics to global capitalism as vague, descriptive, Manichean, and “quite antithetical” to Foucault’s “lessons on power” (Rabinow and Rose 2006, 199). They caution against using Foucault’s term too vaguely, or applying it haphazardly, as they believe Hardt and Negri and others have done, to global structures of capitalist oppression. They remind us that Foucault, especially in his later lectures, made clear that the concept is a historical phenomenon tracing the genealogy of disciplinary power in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (Rabinow and Rose 2006, 199). Essentially, Rabinow and Rose argue against “trans-historical or metaphoric” applications of the term (Rabinow and Rose 2006, 199).

Global Contexts of Biopolitics

In the field of globalization studies many contemporary scholars have proposed an enlargement of Foucault’s framework which takes into account the new forms of international population control and the politics deployed to maximize the life of participants in global capitalism. For example, Mark B. Salter examines the way that an “international biopolitical order is constructed through the creation, classification, and contention of a surveillance regime and an international political technology of the individual that is driven by [...] globalization” (Salter 2011, 1) while others have focused more precisely on new and old structures of power, such as borders, digital information, aesthetics, and medical science.

In one of the earlier explorations of how Foucault’s framework might be translated in lieu of global transformations of finance, labor, media, technology, and foreign diplomacy, authors Michael Dillon and Julian Reid, in their 2001 article “Global Liberal Governance: Biopolitics, Security and War,” focus on the conceptualization and practice of war. They use the term ‘global liberal governance’ in place of biopower to describe the “varied and complex regime of power, whose founding principle lies in the administration and production of life, rather than in threatening death. In other words, global liberal governance is a “form of global biopolitics” (Dillon and Reid 2001, 41). The authors focus their attention on “the peculiar ways in which biopower deploys force and violence” (Dillon and Reid 2001, 41) and the ways that “global biopolitics operates as a strategic game in which the principle of war is assimilated into the very weft and warp of the socio-economic and cultural networks of biopolitical relations” (Dillon and Reid 2001, 42). They will not be the last critics of global biopolitics to note the intimate relationship between military interventions and humanitarian aid initiatives, and how both swivel on the narrative of maximising life.

It appears as if there are two camps across multiple fields which treat biopolitics differently:

the first camp sees biopower in the 21st century as a new world order disattached from state-imperial power that administers to a global population through the organs of non-governmental organizations and private institutions (Dillon and Reid 2001, Fraser 2003, Hardt and Negri 2009); critics of this interpretation accuse its proponents of simply “scaling up Foucault’s analysis of domestic politics to the international level, seeing a global governmentality, a global biopolitics where there is none” (Kelley 2010, 2). These critics assert that geopolitical State powers still exist and are the primary administrators of biopower—security, welfare, management of the good of the population—though their legitimacy and quality of care may be complicated, especially for nations of the Global South, by flows of labor, participation in or subjugation to war, receiving humanitarian aid, and financialization and its structural adjustments (Dean 2002, Kelley 2010, Nguyen 2011).

While the concept of biopower and biopolitics have been iterated in a multitude of ways, sometimes haphazardly, and sometimes usefully, especially in explorations of the relationship between globalization and life processes, many scholars would agree that it should be used with caution. If the intent is to borrow and elaborate on the work of Foucault, one must remember that it means a very specific thing: the governing strategy deployed by a State that prioritizes one technology of power over all others, that of administering to and maximizing biological life processes. Its *main* priority is the normalization (according to its biological ideals) of the population and subjugation of non-normalized elements. However, this caution does not mean the framework cannot be applied to studies of globalization, indeed almost all technologies of power used by various States now operate on global scales; the challenge is to go beyond mere description to analyze exactly how the globalization of biopower and biopolitics have been mechanized and to what purpose.

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About the Authors

Louisiana Lightsey is a PhD student in the cultural anthropology program at the University of Georgia. Her central research focus is political ecology and indigenous community resistance in Latin America. She received her Master's Degree in 2016 from the University of Arizona where she studied Latin American literature and cultural studies in the Department of Spanish & Portuguese.

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