

An Introduction to Biopolitics: Biopolitics – Emergence of the Concept and Field of Study

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Received: 26 Nov 2023; Revised accepted: 11 Dec 2023; Published online: 31 Dec 2023

Abstract

The idea of biopolitics has lot to contribute to the understanding of how the paradigm of science and technology operates in our social life. The article aims to collate the different views on biopolitics across many disciplines and extends to look for new political dimensions. The perspectives in the article will help the scientific disciplines to formulate its own questions about the ways in which it is liberating or subjugating living beings in this world. The underlying threat of this article is about the knowledge across disciplines have created hierarchies and power relations which is dominated the lives of living beings. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of the concept of biopolitics, tracing its historical evolution, theoretical foundations, and contemporary relevance in a science-dominated world. It outlines three major notions of biopolitics: the naturalist view, which links political behaviour to biological determinants; the regulatory view, which positions life processes as objects of political governance in response to the environmental and technological challenges of industrial modernity; and the postmodern view, advanced by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, which interrogates how modern regimes and global capitalist structures increasingly regulate, reproduce and reshape life itself. The paper analyses how developments in biotechnology, governance, and global economic systems have transformed the relationship between politics and life, producing biopolitical subjects and redefining state power, sovereignty and technological intervention. It further highlights gaps in existing scholarship and emphasizes the need for a transdisciplinary approach to understand contemporary political realities shaped by scientific knowledge, technological innovations and shifting power relations. Ultimately, the study argues that biopolitics has moved from the margins to the centre of political enquiry, offering a critical framework to analyze how modern regimes manage, optimize and control life, and to interrogate the socio-cultural implications of emerging knowledge systems.

Key words: Biopolitics, Biopower, Bare life, Science and technology governance, Sovereign power

The word biopolitics is used in the context of an expansive range of seemingly unrelated issues such as human disease, financial support to scientific research, artificial intelligence, robotics, legal issues of euthanasia, child birth, abortion, sex reassignment surgery and clinical trials. It is also used in diverse fields which impact the lives of living beings and their future in an increasingly science-dominated society. It is very conveniently used to relate the issues of science and technology without identifying the essential aspects of it. The increased use of the term signifies that the impact of science and technology is fast permeating the lives of people and make a sense that it has seized the true essence of our lives. The term is widely researched and discussed in the discipline of political science since the 1970s [1]. It is widely accepted among the scholars that the Swedish Political Scientist, Rudolf Kjellen (1864-1922) was the first one to employ the term in social science research. The word 'biopolitics' is increasingly gaining wide attention in the discussions on science and technology on issues impacting 'living beings' [2].

Biopolitics refers to the ways in which political power engages with human life, health, bodies, and populations,

emerging as a distinct field of study in the late twentieth century, particularly through the works of Michel Foucault. It examines how modern states and institutions regulate biological processes such as birth, disease, sexuality, and mortality through policies, scientific knowledge, and technologies. As an interdisciplinary concept, biopolitics bridges political theory, sociology, philosophy, and science and technology studies, offering a critical framework to understand how power operates not only through laws and sovereignty but also through the management and governance of life itself.

Notions of biopolitics

i. Life as basis of politics

There are the three broad notions of biopolitics being widely discussed in academic circles. The first notion of biopolitics is the naturalist position which considers *life as the basis of politics*. The notion of naturalism advocates that "life as being 'beneath' politics, directing and explaining political reasoning and action" [3]. This notion treats the state as organic and its expression can be seen in the biological designs of contemporary political science. The biological approach in

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Citation: Gunasekaran V. 2023. An introduction to biopolitics: Biopolitics – Emergence of the concept and field of study. *Res. Jr. Agril. Sci.* 14(6): 2113-18.

political science uses concepts like blood group, race, colour and physical features of individuals to assess political behaviour. The approach considers any sphere of life is determined by the biological aspects of living beings.

The culmination of this research design resulted in establishing a discipline known as 'biopolitics' and formation of a research committee (Biology and Politics) in the International Political Science Association (IPSA) in 1973. The interest in this area of research have led to "the formation of Association for Politics and Life Sciences by Thomas Wiegel from Northern Illinois University along with a coterie of likeminded scholars including Carol Barer-Barry, Lynton K Caldwell, Peter Corning, Samuel Hines, Fred Kort, Roger Masters, Steven Peterson, Glendon Schubert, James Schubert, Albert Somit, John Wahlke and Meredith Watts in 1980" [4].

Thomas Lemke has identified four groups of researchers working on various theoretical models which subscribes to the naturalist approach of biopolitics. The first group of researchers use neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory to understand the historical and the anthropological question of the development of human beings and the origins of state and society. The second group of researchers use ethological and sociobiological concepts to analyze political behaviour. The third group of researchers use physiological factors to assess the political behaviour of individuals. The fourth category of researchers uses 'biopolitics' [5] which creates impact on the human nature and changes in the environment. Even though there are various theoretical models employed in the naturalist approach of biopolitics, the common research objective is to analyse the political behaviour through the biological factors.

ii. *Life process as objects of politics*

The second notion of biopolitics considers *life processes as the object of politics*. This notion considers politics as 'above' life processes and places more reliance on the political processes to improve the conditions of living beings. This notion of biopolitics seeks to regulate science and technology through political processes since they are the result of human intervention. The idea of regulating science and technology gained lot of currency during the 1960s in Germany and elsewhere due to influence it exerted on the living beings. The formation of World Union for Protection of Life and the all-German Council on Biopolitics during this time were propagating the idea of preserving nature and the politics in future to be determined by biopolitics. German political scientist, Dietrich Gunst, in his work *Politics between Power and Law* (1978) devoted a volume on biopolitics discussing the influence of science and technology during industrialization. The famous German philosopher Volker Gerhardt proposed that life has become object of science and technology and that there is a need for its regulation by politics. The writings of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson influenced the Americans towards the preservation of nature [6].

The idea of regulating science and technology and preserving environment for future generations took roots in the minds of the people due to the onslaught of industrialization in exploiting natural resources. The modern science and technology facilitated the industrialization process in exploiting natural resources which necessitated regulation and social audit. The politics of science and technology emerged in various shades of environmental and green politics in Europe and across the globe which ranged from appealing to individual self about adopting sustainable lifestyles to pressuring governments to implement sustainable policies, the activism also attempted to question the motives of science and technology. The works of eminent scholars in the recent times like Donna Haraway, Hans-

Jorg Rheinberger, Marcela Iacub, Sarah Frankling, Margaret Lock, Lori B Andrews, Dorothy Nelkin, Paul Rutherford, Paul Rabinow and Nico Stehr have emphasized the reliance on political process to establish control over science and technology.

The early 20th century and the post-world war period witnessed a common understanding among the public on environmental degradation and the difficulties linked to the living beings. The threats of unsafe environment and the question on the quality-of-life mobilized politics to play an effective role to secure and safeguard it for the future generation. The threat to environment degradation was also aggravated with various spectacular scientific discoveries like the decoding of DNA which paved way for reproducing nature. This scientific advancement ruptured the differentiation between natural and artificial which also exhibited possibilities of reproducing nature by artificial means. The intrusion of new inventions on nature necessitated a new perspective in the environmental debates to look nature and politics as a single entity. There was a shift in the environmental debates to ideas of biopolitics in understanding the impacts of science and technology over the living beings [7].

iii. *Life as a border to politics*

In the third notion of biopolitics, the postmodern thinkers while critiquing the above two notions propose a different perspective to biopolitics which showed newer ways of understanding the impacts of science and technology. They argued that the above discussed two broad notions of biopolitics inherently do not capture the true meaning of life [8]. Instead, they believe that the notion of life as the basis of politics cannot be sustained due to the enormous knowledge gained in recent times to produce and reproduce life. The life of living beings in modern times has become so highly controllable that it has gone to the extent of engineering nature and all living beings. The research in science and technology has acquired the distinction of demonstrating that nothing is beyond human capacity. The primacy of life over politics has witnessed a serious jolt by the advancements of science and technology in the recent times. In the same vein, they argue that even the second notion of biopolitics, life processes as the object of politics, does not capture the true meaning of life without understanding the strength of new inventions in permeating nature and reordering life and its forms. Living beings have become typical entities of inventions and discoveries and has become perfect objects in the hands of administration to regulate life by the state. It necessitates an improved perspective of politics to analyze the impacts of science and technology. The postmodernists, therefore, seek to go beyond and improve upon these two notions and look for different perspectives that can liberate living beings.

Michel Foucault on biopolitics

This notion of biopolitics evolved through the concerted efforts of French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault and other thinkers like Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. According to Foucault, "life denotes neither the basis nor the object of politics. Instead, it presents a border to politics – a border that should be simultaneously respected and overcome, one that seems to be both natural and given, but also artificial and transformable" [9]. He employed historical analysis in understanding how 'life' itself has become the center of political strategies and knowledges and how power relations are mediating between lives by various regimes across the world. Michel Foucault has broadly outlined the ideas on biopolitics in his works such as *The History of Sexuality: An*

Introduction (1980), *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France 1975-76*(2008), *Society Must be Defended* (2003). He not only employed the term 'biopolitics', but also sometimes used the word 'biopower' without clearly distinguishing the two terms. He used the word 'biopower' for the first time in a lecture on March 17, 1976; then again it appeared in a few pages at the end of *The History of Sexuality; Volume I* published later that year. Thereafter, the word largely disappeared in his work, only to be used occasionally in favour of other objects of analysis such as mechanisms of security, pastoral power and scientific concepts which gave indirect meanings to both the words biopower and biopolitics.

In his genealogy of analysis, biopower's genesis comes after sovereign power and disciplinary power. Biopower, unlike sovereign power, does not possess the right to take life; rather it is the right to live and to let die. Foucault argued that "biopower is able to access the body because it functions through norms rather than laws, because it is internalized by subjects rather than exercised from above through acts or threats of violence, and because it is dispersed throughout society rather than located in a single individual or government body" [10]. The biopower is internalized by the subjects and operates at the larger level of the population, unlike the sovereign power which is external to the human body. The political regime of the time strives to invent new political knowledge so as to produce species which could be more objectified and measured for better governance.

In the paper, 'Security, Territory, Population' which was taught by Foucault in College de France, he used to cite examples like 'do not steal' and 'do not murder' to explain the differences between sovereign power, disciplinary power and biopower in a simple way. He explained that a crime committed by an individual in the sovereign regime would be punished according to his crime which equaled the act of crime decided by the sovereign. It was solely at the mercy of the sovereign to decide upon the punishment for the crime committed by an individual. The disciplinary power was based on the norms of the established laws and rules by political regimes of various kinds. It was very important to know under what condition the criminal committed a crime and what was his material and psychological condition in order to intervene in his life, to rehabilitate him, and bring him back to normalcy. The punishment received by a criminal always aims not to deter, rather to make him understand that he committed a crime on which he did not had any control over it. Foucault believed that the biopower which emerged late in the eighteenth century, is exercised through political knowledges [11]. It operates at a micro level which uses biological features to govern the population. It aims to discipline and govern the identical biological group of individuals in the population rather than targeting single individual. The biopower operates through the human body at the level of birth, mortality, health, life expectancy and longevity which can be disciplined at the population level rather than to act at the level of an individual.

Foucault argued that in contrast to sex, death has now receded from public view by becoming more private and hidden. The death of an individual in the biopower regime is governed by political knowledges whereas in the sovereign power it was a public spectacle to express the power. The transformation of sovereign power into biopower has happened in politics as a result of some important historical transformations due to the growth in economy and scientific knowledge about human life. The pressure to ward off the effects of various forms of epidemics, disease and famine which was a regular phenomenon also gave an impetus to the

technological, scientific, social and medical innovations which in turn have resulted in more control over life [12].

It is argued by him that the 'birth of biopolitics' is closely related to the emergence of liberal forms of government as an art of governing human beings not as an economic theory or a political ideology. It introduced a rationality of government that differs from medieval concepts of domination and from early modern state formation. He argued that the Middle Age government was part of a natural order willed by God and an extension of nature. The continuum was broken by the Middle Age governments by the early modern governments which introduced new reasons for its formation [13].

The historical transformation in the 18th century in the growth of medical and scientific knowledge about the human body and the increase in the industrial and agricultural production created space for the liberal governments to take responsibility for the life and govern them. Foucault argued that the emergence of different political knowledge such as statistics, demography, epidemiology and biology have objectified and measured the human body to be so amenable for governance. The knowledge system produced for governance has transformed the core of politics and reformulated the authority of the government which further necessitated the state to seek newer forms of political knowledge. The new knowledge systems that seek to mitigate and resolve earlier difficulties and assure better luxuries of life in future has not resulted in liberating living beings; rather, it has made them easy targets for governance [14]. The way in which the Green Revolution (GR) was introduced and made 'successful' in India, the same being later labelled as backward by the state, and the promotion of new green revolution by a new knowledge system through Genetically Modified crops (GM crops), can be seen through the perspectives of Foucault.

The concept of biopolitics was not a sustained enquiry by Foucault and it is being argued by many [15] that Foucault might have encountered theoretical problems over its meanings that prevented its further use by him [16]. The analysis of Foucault on biopolitics within the logic of government has given us lot of advantages to assess the present status of the living beings. It would help us to examine the governmental practices and its relationship with technologies in governance, responsibility of the state in assessing risks of a technology, its role in promoting a science policy, to understand power relations between various interest groups in promoting a technology, and on the overall prospects of a good life by the interventions of science and technology.

Giorgio Agamben on biopolitics

Giorgio Agamben was expected to complete the thesis of Foucault and take it forward to sharpen the ideas of biopolitics. The common idea in both of them is the production of 'bare life' by the State and its institutions. The fundamental difference between them is the way in which they conceived the production of 'bare life'. Foucault is not concerned about the origins of 'bare life' but he traces it through relations of power. Agamben used a historical account of the origins of 'bare life' through the relationship of law to life. He argued that it was the historical function of the sovereign to produce 'bare lives' and it was not a new function. He employed the notion of 'sovereign exception' from the ideas of Carl Schmitt who argued that the sovereign was not only the one who decided the rule but also the powerful authority on the exceptions to rules. The exceptions had been pursued by the sovereign according to his/her whims and fancies and it is the significant idea to understand the life of living beings in a state.

It was through the publication of *Homo Sacer* in 1995, which became one of the international bestsellers that Giorgio Agamben got to be known to a wider audience. One of the best ideas which have come out of this work was that he strongly asserted that there is an inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism. He claimed that the regimes from ancient to the modern times, be it any sharply divided regimes, namely the parliamentary democracies and totalitarian dictatorships or the liberal constitutional states and authoritarian regimes, all were producing 'bare lives' [17]. Agamben also presented the idea that the primary feature of governance from the Greek traditions to the Nazi concentration camps was in producing 'bare lives'. He argued that "biopolitics forms the core of the sovereign practice of power which continues even in the modern era; not a break with the western tradition, but rather a generalization and radicalization of that which was simply there at the beginning" [18].

Agamben introduced the term 'bare life' in the context of his comments about Foucault and with reference to the distinction between *zoé* (biological life) and *bios* (political life) by Aristotle. He described that Foucault accepted the Aristotelian categorization of human life that human beings have the capacity for a political existence by coming out of their natural life, but suggested revisiting the categorization and acknowledged that modern man's political life is in question as a living being. Agamben too accepted the categorization of human life by Aristotle but, as a point of departure, he suggested that the ancient distinction between *bios* and *zoé* is at the bottom of the current biopolitical condition. He further asserted that the categorization of different modes of living allows for the production of the biopolitical subject—that is, 'bare life'.

Agamben explained the concept of 'bare life' through the character of "*homo sacer*" (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed" [19]. *Homo sacer* is a person totally at the mercy of the sovereign and can be executed any time as per the sovereign's wish. The individual is banned from the politico-legal community and reduced to the status of physical existence. In modern times Agamben equated 'bare life' to the inmates of Nazi camps, asylum seekers, refugees and the brain dead. Modern democracies, he asserted, always claim to liberate man from their *zoé* but in doing so they only succeed in reinforcing the subordination to sovereign power associated with the *homo sacer*. Agamben has proposed some ideas of how the *homo sacer* could be liberated from varying regimes through his conception of 'happy life' or a 'form of life'. His conception of 'happy life' allows no separation between *bios* and *zoé*. He visualized that 'happy life' can be achieved when these categories are unified in an absolute immanence to itself, in 'the perfection of its own power'. He insisted on redefining life that is no longer founded upon the separation of natural life and political life, and in which every form of relation is lived in pure immanence, grounded in itself alone [20].

The constitution of organized society under the sovereign power and the exclusion of human beings from legal rights produce a biopolitical body. Agamben argue that the production of biopolitical body which was once at the margins of political existence has shifted to the center of the political domain. It is a hidden agenda of democratic government to totalitarian regime in producing biopolitical bodies which has moved very closely into every human life. Agamben argued that the liberties and rights won by the individuals is an inscription on their lives confirming to the state order which is not liberation achieved by individuals but an offering more into the clutches of sovereign power to produce biopolitical bodies.

The analysis of Agamben in producing biopolitical body through the rule of exception of sovereign power is limed to those without legal rights, refugees or asylum seekers but failed to examine those who are socially excluded in modern regimes. He also failed to understand the politicization of nature and the influence of biotechnological inventions which is shaping life in the present times. The contribution of Agamben could be employed to critically analyze the impact of GM crops on farmers who are at times become excluded category of lives when they become helpless with the failure of new technologies promoted in the market. The inability of the state to protect farmers and the increasing number of farmer suicide relates to the ideas of Agamben in the making of 'bare bodies'.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri on biopolitics

The biopolitics theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have expounded a different perspective from Foucault and Agamben. The perspective of these theorists is not based on the powers of sovereign or on the exception powers of the sovereign in producing bare lives. They argued that capitalism has established strong economic and political structures like WTO, European Union, MNCs, NGOs and UN which structures reality in the society. The increasing strength of these structures has brought sovereignty out of political borders and has resulted in declining powers of the nation-states. The theorists have also espoused that the global political and economic structures have initiated the progress of industrial capitalism into 'cognitive capitalism'. It is argued by the thinkers that the new progress in society would bring in common bodies filled with same emotions and intellect. This process would introduce a new mode of production where knowledge would play a dominant role in creating new meanings about social products [21].

Hardt and Negri describe biopower as a total surrender of the people to the political economy of the government which is dominated by the capitalist. The economic model propagates social, political and cultural relations that overlap and influence each other. The work culture of this new economy would be of more automated, networked and globalized production where knowledge and creativity, language and emotion are central to production and reproduction within society. It would be also difficult to categorize labor in a form of individual or collective and intellectual or physical. The transformation of production leads to new social relations of production called as 'immaterial labor' [22]. There would be no limitation for the capitalist to generate surplus value where nature is not an exception. They argue that nature itself is an object of technological intervention and becomes a new capital to exploit [23]. The biotechnological intervention by the capitalist has tendered to produce more innovative options which needs to be examined whether they are for the liberation of living beings or is it a way to permanently subjugate the living beings. The analysis of Hardt and Negri would give a perspective for the thesis to critically understand the seed market, the biotech companies and the labor of Indian farmer with new technologies.

Interdisciplinary perspectives on biopolitics

The research on biopolitics has progressed by taking on different perspectives across disciplines. In a larger view there can be two trends identified, one which directly links politics and life and the other which takes up questions of life but a scarce link to politics. The important works which links politics have largely addressed the biopolitical function, its mobilization of producing new forces and enumerated distinctiveness of its research from other areas of politics or

political theory. The abstract of some of the views are presented below:

Agnes Heller and Ference Feher in their book *Biopolitics* (1994) took a view very much different from the Foucauldian perspective, which viewed that the present-day politics have led people to sacrifice hard earned freedom to safeguard and secure their life. The urge to sustain their lives and renewed views on the health and environment have made politics move closely to their body which they call as “biologizations” of social conditions. Anthony Giddens in his work, *Modernity and Self –Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991) argued that the 20th century modernity entered a new stage of modernity which he calls it as ‘late modern’. He argues that the new phase developed scepticism towards fundamental truths, by opening up rational and democratic arguments leading to establishment of new traditions. The urge to open up truths is aimed to further fulfil and satisfy life. Body and self are increasingly viewed as flexible and alterable as well as subject to processes of knowledge formation. He has also touched upon the biotechnological innovations to show how politics have moved very closely to body.

The perspectives on biopolitics have also come from science and technology studies, medical and sociology anthropology as well as from feminist theory and gender studies. These studies even though have opened up space in political theory but more concentrated on the nature and life. The main focus is on the analysis of the new development of scientific knowledge like the biotechnologies which has emerged as mechanisms to alter and control life. The studies have made substantial progress to extend the Foucauldian perspective from an idea of looking body at an exterior level to an interior level. They have argued that the power relations which was once very much external to the body in disciplining it has permeated into the body by the new inventions of science and technology. One of the very important lacunae of these works is that they do not focus on the politics or the transformation of politics linked with science and technology rather it is more concentrated on the “reinvention of nature” [24].

There has been an enormous account of works done in the above perspective by many scholars, like Donna Haraway, Hans-Jorg Rheinberger, Marcela Iacob, Sarah Franklin, Margaret Lock, Lore B Andrews, Dorothy Nelkin, Paul Rainbow, Nikolas Rose, Lene Koch and Bruce Braun. There are also various works which examined the ‘bioeconomy’ emerged

through the biotechnological innovations and impacts of it on the substance of life. Wilhelm Ropke, Alexander Rustow, Rudolf Goldscheid, Theodore W. Schultz, Gary S. Becker, Catherine Waldby, Robert Mitchell, Melinda Cooper and Kaushik Sunder Rajan focused on the above subject.

CONCLUSION

Life has become an abstraction of scientific knowledge which has to be related with the present-day politics. The idea of biopolitics is one of the effective ways to interpret the present-day politics. It was once at the periphery of the social science enquiry but has gained a core role in the study of politics in the present times. It can assess the network of power relations and forms of subjectivity associated with the reordering of life by the biotechnological innovations. It can propose alternatives to the changed realities of life and mobilize various other knowledges in the process. It also has generated a necessity for a transdisciplinary dialogue for any political decisions in the present times. The theoretical discussion on biopolitics suggests that living beings on this earth are under the ideological influences of the various regimes present in modern times. One of the most important aspects to be noted in the discussions is that the natural life of living beings is under stress due to the vast knowledge system managed by the regimes. The stress is not only on the political and social life but more on the biological aspect of the living beings which is capable of giving genesis to new realities of life. The knowledge system aspired by the regimes in governing living beings with the claims of liberating them have instead led them to more engineering of life and subjugation. It is pertinent therefore to reflect upon the knowledge system which is emerging and prevalent in the society at two levels; the various aspects of knowledge creation and the approval of the knowledge by the political regime. It is also important to bring the discussion of knowledge and posit its socio-cultural perspective with biopolitics. The extension of the debates of knowledge to bio-politics will help to decipher science policies, technologies and the power relations which exist between various knowledge systems. The Political Science discipline could contribute in a better way to link biopolitics and perspectives of knowledge by analyzing power relations even though the exercise heavily draws from various other disciplines of study like the science and technology studies, history of science, philosophy of science and sociology of knowledge.

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