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Introduction

Jussi Backman and Antonio Cimino

Biopolitics has in recent decades become a seminal concept—a theoretical “buzzword,” as Thomas Lemke (2011, 1) puts it—within philosophy, the social sciences, and the humanities, and in several other disciplines and interdisciplinary approaches belonging to the wider human sciences. In a recent anthology, Jeffrey R. Di Leo and Peter Hitchcock (2020b, 1) characterize biopolitics as “one of the most influential critical paradigms in the human sciences and the humanities today.” There has been talk of a “biopolitical turn” in the social sciences and humanities (see, for example, Minca 2015), and Carlos Gómez Camarena (2014, 164) goes so far as to claim that, “[a]t the beginning of the twenty-first century, the concept of biopolitics has almost totally monopolized philosophical debates about politics, thus marking a new stage in political philosophy.”¹

While the concept of biopolitics has had such a notable influence, its success goes hand in hand with a certain amount of inherent ambiguity on both the conceptual and the terminological level; the more the term has gained in popularity, the more denotations and connotations it has accrued. “Biopolitics” as a term was introduced by political theorists of the early twentieth century as a designation for political theories, metaphors, discourses, or practices informed by biology and vitalism; it was first coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1905, 24; see also 1916; 1920, 92–4) in the context of his study of the state as a “form of life.”² The term was given its most influential contemporary definition in the 1970s by Michel Foucault, who uses it

¹ For the most important general scholarly volumes on the topic of biopolitics, see Fehér and Heller 1994; Heller and Puntischer Riekmann 1996; Van den Daele 2005; Rose 2007; Lemke 2007, 2011; Clough and Willse 2011; Campbell and Sitze 2013; Lemm and Vatter 2014; Prozorov and Rentea 2017; Mills 2018; Di Leo and Hitchcock 2020a.

² Organistic and vitalistic approaches to politics, similar to that of Kjellén, were also developed by such German theorists as Karl Binding (1920), Eberhard Dennert (1920), and Jakob von Uexküll (1920). An early example of a use of the term in a sense similar to the later Foucauldian approach is a 1911 diatribe by G. W. Harris in the British weekly review *The New Age*, calling for “bio-politics” in the sense of a policy taking into consideration the quantity and the quality of the population. On the conceptual history of biopolitics, see Esposito 2008, 16–24.

in his Collège de France lecture courses (Foucault 1997, 213–35; 2003, 239–64; 2004a; 2004b, 3–118; 2008; 2009, 1–114) and in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1976, 177–91; 1978, 135–45) to describe the discourses and practices through which human beings in modern societies are increasingly categorized and controlled as members of a species, as biological populations.³ Biopolitics, for Foucault, is based on the exercise of *biopower*, defined as the “set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy” (Foucault 2004b, 3; 2009, 1)—that is, governmental and administrative technologies and interventions aimed at sexuality, reproduction, heredity, health and disease, hygiene, natality, and mortality, as well as (in certain notorious cases) eugenicist considerations. For Foucault himself, “biopolitics” and “biopower” are highly versatile and polyvalent concepts, initially applied especially to the racist and racialist considerations and strategies inherent in Nazism as well as modern socialism (Foucault 1997, 213–35; 2003, 239–64), but later also situated within the general framework of liberalism (Foucault 2004a, 24n; 2008, 22n).

The term and the topic have since been expanded and developed, notably in the Italian philosophical context, by theorists such as Giorgio Agamben (1995, 1998), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004, 2009), and Roberto Esposito (1998, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2011). In these subsequent redeployments of the Foucauldian theory of biopolitics and its predecessors, new approaches to the concept and redefinitions proliferate. Agamben has reframed the concepts of biopower and biopolitics by introducing the notion of “bare life,” which has resulted in a controversial account of Europe’s political history. Hardt and Negri have instead proposed a terminological distinction between biopower and biopolitics, defining the former as “power over life” and the latter as “the power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 57). Yet another approach has been put forward by Esposito, who suggests the possibility and necessity of an “affirmative biopolitics” (2004, 211–5; 2008, 191–4; on this topic, see also chapter 8 by Sergei Prozorov in this volume). In view of this semantic diversity of “biopolitics” and “biopower,” this volume takes these concepts and terms as inherently problematic starting points. One of its central aims is to map out and explore their multiple meanings and facets with a particular focus on ancient thought and its modern reappropriations.

The terminological and conceptual ambiguities of biopolitics go hand in hand with different—at times, widely diverging and even opposing—narratives about its history. According to Foucault’s genealogy, biopolitics is primarily a modern phenomenon that gains predominance

³ Foucault’s earliest attested use of the term “biopolitics” is in his 1974 lectures on “social medicine” in Rio de Janeiro (Foucault 2000, 137; 2001, 210).

as the sovereign power of the early modern rulers over life and death evolves, starting in the seventeenth century, into a disciplinary “anatomy-politics”—the administration of the individual bodies of subjects—and a “bio-politics of the population” (Foucault 1976, 177–91; 1978, 135–45). The rise of biopolitics coincides with the emergence, since the late eighteenth century, of the new biological and social sciences and the rise of industrial capitalism, and is centered around the modern concept of population; Foucault mentions Jean-Baptiste Moheau (1745–94), author of one of the earliest treatises on demography (Moheau 1778), as the “first great theorist” of biopolitics (Foucault 2004b, 23–4; 2009, 22). We should note that, as Di Leo and Hitchcock (2020b, 1) point out, “biopolitics in various theoretical forms precedes its name” in the sense that several thinkers prior to Foucault provide strikingly similar accounts of the origins of modern political thought. Foucault’s analysis resonates particularly well with Hannah Arendt’s account of the transformation of the human being in industrial society into a “laboring animal” (*animal laborans*) for whom biological life and its subjective quality constitute the “greatest good” (see Arendt 1998, 305–25). Arendt, without using the term itself, outlines a version of the history of biopower emphasizing the modernity of the phenomenon but also its ancient roots (on this, see chapters 6 and 7 by Jussi Backman and Ville Suuronen in this volume). Following Foucault and Arendt, Agamben has insisted on the link between modernity and biopolitics, but at the same time, he has tried to locate the ancient origins of biopower and biopolitics; accordingly, his genealogy of biopolitical phenomena has often resulted in, or is based on, thought-provoking interpretations of ancient philosophical, juridical, medical, and literary sources. However, as pointed out especially in chapters 4 and 9 by Kalliopi Nikolopoulou and Antonio Cimino, a number of Agamben’s relevant concepts—notably his notion of “bare life”—have not gone uncontested.

One may thus wonder whether, and to what extent, the thesis of the exclusively modern origin of biopolitics is tenable. Recent studies have indeed started questioning that thesis.⁴ Mika Ojakangas (2016) has argued that biopolitical discourses on population control, eugenics, and public health and hygiene are, in fact, a fundamental keystone of Platonic and Aristotelian theories of politics and the art of government. While Foucault traces the roots of biopolitical “governmentality” to the Christian idea of the pastoral power of the church, Ojakangas, by contrast, sees Christianity as interrupting the biopolitical theories and practices of classical antiquity, which were then gradually resumed by secularized modern government. In chapter 2

⁴ For previous studies on the topic of biopolitics and antiquity, see Arnhart 1988; Forti 2006; Milbank 2008; Finlayson 2010; Lemke 2010; Frías Urrea 2013; Ojakangas 2013, 2016, 2017; Almeida 2014; Jobe 2015; Skornicki 2015; Hawkins 2018.

of this volume, Ojakangas develops this thesis by way of a reading of Plato. Other, modified senses and contexts in which biopolitics can be attributed to antiquity are suggested in chapters 1 and 3 by Sara Brill and Kathy L. Gaca. Critical evaluations of different aspects of such an attribution can be found in chapters 4, 5, and 6 by Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, Adriel Trott, and Jussi Backman.

By studying the complex relationship between classical antiquity and biopolitics from different perspectives, this volume seeks to introduce new lines of research that aim at problematizing and rearticulating the concepts, terms, and histories of biopolitics and biopower by elaborating the extent and sense of their applicability to the ancient context. The contributions comprised in the volume explore and utilize these concepts as tools for elaborating the differences and continuities between antiquity and modernity and for narrating Western intellectual and political history in general. Without committing itself to any particular thesis or approach, the volume evaluates both the relevance of ancient thought for the contemporary understanding of “biopolitics” and the relevance of biopolitical theories for the study of ancient thought. Biopolitics may turn out to provide a novel reference point for articulating the relationship between modernity and antiquity from various possible perspectives. It can be used for looking, in the famous words of Bernard of Chartres, at the moderns as dwarves standing on the shoulders of the ancient giants: even in the field of biopolitical theory, it is perhaps only through the support of the monumental intellectual achievements of antiquity that we are able to see (marginally) farther.⁵ On the other hand, biopolitics can offer yet another vantage point for regarding, with J. G. Herder (1796, 5–6), classical antiquity as the irretrievably lost youth of Western culture, a state of (pre-biopolitical) conceptual and theoretical innocence to which there is no return; for seeking, like the early Martin Heidegger (1975, 157; 1988, 111), to “understand the Greeks better than they understood themselves”—that is, to articulate their thinking with the help of concepts and notions that were unavailable to them (such as biopolitics); or for attempting, with Foucault, to construct a historical genealogy of modernity, a “critical ontology of ourselves” (Foucault 1984, 47; 2001, 1396), in which antiquity is used as a narrative point of reference and comparison, as a “mirror” of modernity differentiated from and contrasted with it with the help of concepts like biopolitics and governmentality.

The volume consists of nine contributed chapters by leading scholars in the field. The contributions in part I (“Biopolitics in Ancient Thought”) study different senses in which instances of biopolitical discourse can be detected in ancient thought. Chapter 1 by Sara Brill,

⁵ Quoted by John of Salisbury ca. 1159 in *Metalogicon* 3.4.

“Biopolitics and the ‘Boundless People’: An Iliadic Model,” discusses the extent to which the concept of “population,” which plays a defining role in Foucault’s narrative of biopower, is present in ancient Greek thought. On the one hand, Brill argues that the notion of population as such cannot be unequivocally identified in antiquity. On the other, excavating the conception of political power and human collective action that undergirds the Aristotelian understanding of the formation of a political multitude, Brill traces its roots to the ways in which the Homeric *Iliad* uses animal imagery to figure human sociality, politics, and collective action.

In chapter 2, “Plato and the Biopolitical Purge of the City-State,” Mika Ojakangas questions Agamben’s interpretation of the nonviolent character of Plato’s understanding of the law and argues that from Plato’s point of view, violence is an integral part of political management and beneficial to the well-being of the city-state. In accordance with the theses developed in his seminal book on the history of biopower, Ojakangas maintains that this violence is essentially biopolitical in nature, and puts great emphasis on the intersection of politics and medicine in Plato. In doing so, he also shows the extent to which Plato’s “biopolitical state racism” aims at both enhancing the physical and mental well-being of the population and eliminating those who are incurable.

Chapter 3, “Sovereign Power and Social Justice: Plato and Aristotle on Justice and Its Biopolitical Basis in Heterosexual Copulation, Procreation, and Upbringing” by Kathy L. Gaca, discusses the biopolitical substance of Plato’s and Aristotle’s views on the significance of sexual and procreative customs for social justice. Gaca’s argument is that the Platonic and Aristotelian accounts of justice promote a more equitable approach to heterosexual relations and moral upbringing and that, conversely, Plato and Aristotle also maintain that equitable sexual relations and upbringing enhance the attainment of a genuinely inclusive social justice. This biopolitical project helped Aristotle and his Peripatetic followers to highlight, in their studies on Greek politics, the dangers of ravaging warfare and martial sexual violence as an extreme example of sovereign biopower in the form of militarized aggression leading to precipitous social injustice and disadvantaged upbringing. Further, the Peripatetics’ new discursive stance of openly discussing the practice of martial rape in ravaging warfare influenced later ancient authors likewise to be more frank in discussing this sexual aggression and its adverse social effects.

Part II (“Ancient Thought beyond Biopolitics”) focuses on aspects and dimensions of ancient thought that elude, transcend, contrast with, or are alternative to different aspects of biopolitics. Chapter 4 by Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, “Otherwise than (Bio)politics: Nature and the Sacred in Tragic Life,” challenges Agamben’s account of biopolitics, which presents the twentieth-century death camp with its biopolitical production of bare life as a catastrophic break

with any previous epoch and, at the same time, begins its genealogy of biopolitics with Aristotle. Nikolopoulou argues that classical Greek tragedy provides us with a rich imagery for articulating the imprint of nature upon our individual and social existence, but one that eludes the key conceptual distinctions of the contemporary discourse on biopolitics.

Chapter 5, “Beyond Biopolitics and Juridico-Institutional Politics: Aristotle on the Nature of Politics” by Adriel M. Trott, examines the extent to which the conception of nature that underlies Aristotle’s account of politics can be seen as “biopolitical.” Trott argues that Aristotle’s approach exceeds both a merely biological conception of nature and a juridico-institutional understanding of politics. In Trott’s view, Aristotle’s third alternative is grounded on an approach to politics as a natural activity and relies on an inclusive sense of nature that is not reducible to biological processes; this approach counteracts the modern tendency to contrast politics with nature and the soul with the body.

Chapter 6, Jussi Backman’s “*Bene vivere politice*: On the (Meta)biopolitics of ‘Happiness,’” studies, in turn, the alleged “biopolitical” dimensions of the ideal of “happiness” in ancient political theory. Backman suggests an understanding of biopolitics focused on the conceptualization of the final aim of the political community, rather than techniques of government. Backman argues that the Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and the Thomistic *beatitudo* are in fact “metabiopolitical” ideals centered on contemplation as an activity that lies beyond the communal and biological concerns of everyday life. With the help of Arendt, the chapter also investigates the momentous “biopolitical” transformation of the concept of happiness into “quality of life” in modern political thought, especially in Thomas Hobbes.

Part III (“Biopolitical Interpretations of Ancient Thought”) includes critical discussions of contemporary interpretations of ancient thought in a biopolitical framework. In chapter 7, “Hannah Arendt’s Genealogy of Biopolitics: From Greek Materialism to Modern Human Superfluity,” Ville Suuronen outlines a historical account of biopolitics based on Arendt’s interpretation of ancient political ideals and their transformation through Christianity. In Suuronen’s view, Arendt enables us to discover the fundamental element of biopolitics in the “materialism” of classical Greek political philosophy that regarded politics in terms of ruling and managing the necessities of biological life, ultimately aiming at making possible the contemplative life. Describing the various transformations that the Western conception of the significance of the biological life-process underwent from classical antiquity through Christianity and modernity, Suuronen explains how Arendt connects modern biopower with the rise of the *animal laborans* and the corresponding ideal of biological life as the “highest good.” In Suuronen’s interpretation, for Arendt, this development also forms a basic precondition for the emergence of totalitarian

domination.

Chapter 8 by Sergei Prozorov, “From Biopolitics to Biopoetics and Back Again: On a Counterintuitive Continuity in Foucault’s Thought,” suggests a new interpretation of Foucault’s later works by shedding light on the relationship between his account of biopolitics and his interpretation, in his final lectures of the 1980s, of the ancient “biopoetic” techniques of constituting the self. Prozorov illuminates the unity and coherence of the various lines of research sketched out by the later Foucault: for Foucault, Prozorov argues, the biopoetics of the Hellenistic period is a solution to essentially biopolitical problems. In this context, Prozorov analyzes the biopolitical meaning of Foucault’s interpretations of both Stoic philosophy and the Cynics, and their relevance for current debates on affirmative biopolitics.

The last contribution of the volume, chapter 9, “Agamben’s Aristotelian Biopolitics: Conceptual and Methodological Problems” by Antonio Cimino, discusses a number of issues arising from Agamben’s interpretation of Aristotelian texts. Cimino concentrates both on Agamben’s reading of the relationship between *bios* and *ζῶε*, and on some tenets of the Agambenian “genealogy” of biopower. Cimino argues that Agamben’s reading does not do justice to Aristotle’s conception of life, because it is based on a peculiar use of Schmitt’s notion of exception. Moreover, Cimino contends that Agamben does not substantiate his narrative of the history of biopower in a persuasive manner. Despite these negative conclusions, Cimino is to a certain extent sympathetic to Agamben’s thesis about the ancient origins of biopower.

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