

Bioethics as Biopower: a view from an Eschatological perspective

Stojanov Trajche, PhD.

University Goce Delcev – Stip, Macedonia

Abstract:

Bioethics is the study of the ethical issues emerging from advances in biology and medicine. Bioethicists are concerned with the ethical questions that arise in the relationships among life sciences, biotechnology, medicine, politics, law, and philosophy.

Obviously the bioethics is primarily concerned with the body. Bioethics ignores the eternal, i.e. eschatological perspective, ergo - mans divine potentiality. But, can bodies be perceived outside this eschatological perspective? We think that bodies cannot be treated solely from the perspective of immanency. Only thinking from the perspective of transcendence we can understand that each new medical method and every advance of biology is blessed, just because it regards the whole man, who lives in the present age, but is journeying towards the age to come. Conversely, every discovery in the field of biotechnology that encloses man within the limits of his biological life, however much it makes earthly life easier, conceals something tragic, and even dangerous. Dangerous in a sense that thus bioethics turns over into a biopower that has only one goal: to execute the power over the bodies. Thus, ironically bioethics - staying in the plan of the immanence - becomes just one of the means of the biopolitics. Ethics, i.e. bioethics that does not contains the question of meaning easily can be turned into indoctrination and even one of many biopolitical tools, strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are managed under regimes of authority.

Key words: Bioethics, Biopolitics, Biopower, Michael Foucault, eschatology

Introduction: Bioethics and Biopolitics

From its inception, bioethics has claimed to be a project of reflection on the moral issues raised by new technologies. More precisely, Bioethics is the study of the ethical issues emerging from advances in biology and medicine. Bioethicists are concerned with the ethical questions that arise in the relationships among life sciences, biotechnology, medicine, politics, law, and philosophy. In words of Potter: "Bioethics is advanced as a new discipline that combines biological knowledge with a knowledge of human value systems... I chose bio- to represent biological knowledge, the science of living systems; and I chose -ethics to represent knowledge of human value systems."

When in 1972 Michel Foucault introduced the term *biopolitics*, he established a notion that brings together a set of developments and researches traditionally belonging to different fields. In its internal complexity this notion implies an analysis of different discursive practices inherent to the fields of politics, economics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, biology, and medicine, which, in turn, articulate a particular way of understanding what it means to be a human being

Foucault had used the term *bio-politics* associating it to the body and medicine, regarding it as a capitalistic strategy: *for the capitalistic society the biopolitics is what is important before anything else: the biological, the somatic, the corporeal. The body is a biopolitical reality; medicine is a biopolitical strategy we must speak of 'biopolitics' to designate what makes life and its mechanisms enter in the field of explicit calculations and makes power-knowledge a change agent of human life*

Foucault's biopolitics primarily explores the connections between politics and life (*bios*). As a political discourse, it focuses on a strong aspect of state control which is exercised not only from an ideological point of view, but which also exerts influence over a "social body," understood as both an individual body and the population as a whole. Foucault defined biopolitics as "the endeavor, begun in the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the phenomena

characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population: health, sanitation, birth-rate, longevity, and race" (Foucault, 2003). Biopolitics involves a set of discursive practices aiming to control (under the logic of *governmentality*) the life (biologically-defined) of the citizens of any *polis*. Formally, this governance is put into practice through sanitary controls and health care policies, which some authors define as the "politics of life."

In short - *bios* or the 'life' of the population increasingly comes to inform the way in which individuals are subject to the governmental control, surveillance, and regulation"

These new types of political actions were developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when life became an object of "calculation" in different strategies of the state power. That's why he introduces the term BIOPOWER Foucault argues that *biopower is a technology which appeared in the late eighteenth century for managing populations*. It incorporates certain aspects of *disciplinary power*. If disciplinary power is about training the actions of bodies, biopower is about managing the births, deaths, reproduction and illnesses of a population.

Bioethics as Biopolitics

Agamben is continuing to develop this Foucauldian ideas of bios, making a distinction between BIOS and ZOE. *bios* (the form or manner in which life is lived) and *zoē* (the biological fact of life). "bare life" – zoe, as opposed to bios, that is 'qualified life' Zoe, refers to "life in general, without characterization." Bios characterizes a specific life, the outlines that distinguish one living thing from another. Bios is the Greek root for "biography," zoe for "zoology."

"The Foucauldian thesis will then have to be corrected or, at least, completed, in the sense that what characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion of *zoe* in the *polis* – which is, in itself, absolutely ancient – nor simply the fact that life as such becomes a principle object of the projections and calculations of State power. Instead the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of

the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested.” (pg. 9). Giorgio Agamben's concept for life that has been exposed to what he terms the structure of exception that constitutes contemporary biopower. The term originates in Agamben's observation that the Ancient Greeks had two different words for what in contemporary European languages is simply referred to as 'life': *bios* (the form or manner in which life is lived) and *zoē* (the biological fact of life). His argument is that the loss of this distinction obscures the fact that in a political context, the word 'life' refers more or less exclusively to the biological dimension or *zoē* and implies no guarantees about the quality of the life lived. Bare life refers then to a conception of life in which the sheer biological fact of life is given priority over the way a life is lived, by which Agamben means its possibilities and potentialities.

Is *bios* in BIOethics, understood actually as *Zoe* supposed to dictate moral values (e.g., so that what is natural is more important than what is artificial), or is it the other way around (so that what is ethical – which may mean: of social origin, or non-natural, including scientific beliefs and practices – is more important than the natural and should dominate, or at least guide the natural (*zoe*)? Obviously, discourses in bioethics are imbedded in deep political assumptions. A profound insights into the political nature of bioethics gives credence to the suspicion of many that bioethics has become, or always has been, a biopolitics. Still, for Foucault, biopolitics is not necessarily lamentable, but instead is an ambiguous, or possibly even a polyvalent condition of modern life. On the one hand, a biopolitics might come to shape the destiny of peoples for the better (the dream of Liberalism); but it might come to shape the destiny of peoples against their wills (a concern of contemporary libertarians). Thus the spectrum of political tendencies within the discipline of bioethics reveals a tension on various levels: not only can ethical issues not be settled by mere moral reasoning due to our lack of consensus at the foundational level, but one also is confronted with the

even more disconcerting conclusion that the domain of “public reason” (i.e., the polis) is characterized likewise by dissensus.

Following Foucault’s ideas, *biopolitics* considers the extension of state power over both the physical and social bodies of a population. Thus, a possible definition of “biopolitics” could include *the political application of bioethics*. One case scenario in which we can better analyze this claim is the current development in *reprogenetics*. Reprogenetics can also intertwined with biopolitics, in the sense understood by Foucault.

Consider, for example, the implementation of the Law No. 26.862, introduced in Argentina, in 2013, which guarantees a comprehensive access to medical techniques and health-care procedures of assisted reproduction. This legislation assures that, from now on, more prepaid health care coverage will cover the assisted reproductive treatments for citizens, who, for a variety of reasons, cannot conceive naturally. We should carefully observe, then, the scope and effect that new legislations have over society. This is only one example of how public policy can extend its power over the biological and social body.

Suggestions made in 2008 by Scotland Yard and the Institute for Public Policy Research in Britain that children as young as five should be DNA typed and their details placed in a database if they exhibit behavioural signs indicating future criminal activity is a perfect example of what Agamben means by bare life. It reduces the prospects of the life of a particular child to their biology and takes no interest in or account of the actual circumstances of their life.

Conclusion through Thomas Lemke`s view on Biopolitics

“The critical ethos of an analytics of biopolitics might also disrupt the current institutional and discursive dominance of bioethics. Bioethics has narrowed the terms of public debate on the relations between life and politics, since the discussion is mainly conducted in ethical terms and as an argument about values (cf. Gehring 2006, 8–9; Wehling 2007). Whereas an analytics of biopolitics offers us a way of perceiving the complexity of a relational network, bioethical discourse obscures the historical

genesis and social context of biotechnological and biomedical innovations in order to present alternative options for decision-making. Thus, it fails to account for the epistemological and technological foundations of life processes and their integration into power strategies and processes of subjectivation. The emphasis in bioethics is on abstract choices, and there is no examination of who possesses (and to what degree) the material and intellectual resources actually to use specific technological or medical options. Also, bioethics often neglects the social constraints and institutional expectations that individuals might experience when they wish to take advantage of the options that, in principle, are available to them.

Bioethics focuses on the question, what is to be done? It reduces problems to alternatives that can be treated and decided. It gives answers to specific demands. An analytics of biopolitics, on the other hand, seeks to generate problems. It is interested in questions that have not yet been asked. It raises awareness of all those historical and systematic correlations that regularly remain outside the bioethical framework and its pro-contra debates. An analytics of biopolitics opens up new horizons for questioning and opportunities for thinking, and it transgresses established disciplinary and political borders. It is a problematizing and creative task that links a diagnostics of the contemporary with an orientation to the future, while at the same time destabilizing apparently natural or self-evident modes of practice and thought – inviting us to live differently. As a result, an analytics of biopolitics has a speculative and experimental dimension: it does not affirm what is but anticipates what could be different.” But where to seek that different?

Obviously the bioethics is primarily concerned with the body. We have to have in mind that Medicine and biology are not concerned with soulless objects or beings, that is to say they do not correspond to botany or even to zoology. Nevertheless one is religious or not, it is inevitable fact that the whole existence of the human person is illumined by what is *going* to happen. Nevertheless one believes in future life or not, death is inevitable for both. Bioethics ignores the eternal, i.e. eschatological perspective, ergo – man`s divine potentiality. Within this eschatological attitude to life bioethical problems can be seen in a different light. The major problem of bioethics

today is that it tries to give answers to questions relating to the present, enclosed within the dimension of immanency and within the limits of the immanency.

But, can bodies be perceived outside this eschatological perspective? We think that bodies cannot be treated solely from the perspective of immanency. Biosciences, bioethics perceives human solely through his nature, not as excess of nature. Man is excess, exclusion from nature. Only thinking from the perspective of transcendence we can understand that each new medical method and every advance of biology is useful or useless from that perspective, just because it regards the whole man, who lives in the present age, but is journeying towards the age to come. Conversely, every discovery in the field of biotechnology that encloses man within the limits of his biological life, however much it makes earthly life easier, conceals something tragic, and even dangerous. Dangerous in a sense that thus bioethics turns over into a biopower that has only one goal: to execute the power over the bodies. Thus, ironically bioethics - staying in the plan of the immanence - might just become one of the means of the biopolitics. Ethics, i.e. bioethics that does not contains the question of meaning easily can be turned into indoctrination and even one of many biopolitical tools, strategies and mechanisms through which human life processes are managed under regimes of authority. It is a mistake to believe that bioethics, as a system of rules and moral commands, is able to free man from the dilemmas that he is presented with by Biotechnology. Bioethics should be a tool for resistance of power, not its legitimization! By this medicalization of life, zoe enters into the polis, the borders between zoe and bios are blurred, unrecognizable.

Each and every human being is a free and unique person, who comes to face situations within his own "history" that concern him exclusively. No codification of rules and moral dictates can solve the problems of any one person. That is the sure way of turning bioethics to biopower of biopolitics. There is no universal solutions, especially not proscribed by some bioethical committees. Just because of these uniqueness of a person that comes only from this eschatological perspective. Bioethics must not simply be the handmaid of prosperity. It must see the human person within what is his or her actual dimension and not exclusively and solely through his or her

biological existence and material comforts. Changing the relation toward life depends of understanding of that life, what that life is. Understanding that life solely as bio in a sense of zoe, inevitably turns bioethics into biopolitics.

That's why because of today`s biomedical advances even in bioethical discourse everybody are talking about quality of life instead of value of life, or even more of meaning of life? Meaning of life is religious question today, and religious question in the age of science that can resolve every question is sufficient (surplus). But what else can life have, or what else we can seek from life but meaning and value. We are not seeking for quality, quality is needed, necessary but not sufficient condition of life. We can seek quality when we are buying TV, or potatoes eventually but not human life. Our life has value and meaning in the first place.

When we evaluate our biological existence through the criterion of our eschatological ecclesial existence, our whole conduct is illumined and our every action acquires a new meaning. And only by this meaning bioethics can become tool for resistance of biopolitics.

Bibliography:

Potter, V. R. (1970). Bioethics: the science of survival. *Perspectives in biology and medicine*, 14(1), 127-153.

Foucault, M. (2003). *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Picador.

Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Rose, N. (2007). *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century*. Princeton University Press.

Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press.

Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*. Vintage Books.

Kroker, A. (2005). The biopolitics of postmodern bodies: Determinations of self in immune system discourse. *Body & Society*, 11(2), 55-71.

Lemke, T. (2011). *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*. NYU Press.

Shildrick, M. (2002). *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. Sage Publications.