

On biopower

Literature



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I. Introduction

It is imperative that we gain an objective view of what biopower is. This is so because the term itself evokes frightening images to many people. They think of it as genetic manipulation and of using the human body for experimentation. They think of biological warfare and the spread of disease to exterminate poor, deficient and unproductive people. They further associate it with historical events such as Auschwitz and other violent racial purification efforts.

Although it is not a word of great popularity, renewed focus has been given on biopower in recent years. This is because the level of technology we have today vis. a vis. how it is used, which groups they are directed to and who benefits from it are questions that people started to raise. The exacerbation of class antagonisms, racial and ethnic strifes and shifting third world to first world relationships in contemporary times created a growing interest in its study.

This paper aims to provide an overview of what biopower is. Following its definition, its historical and contemporary usage is also explored. This furthers the understanding of its social and political context and more importantly, its effects on society.

II. Review of Related Literature

The book “ Empire” by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri is a recent, controversial academic work that explicitly used the concepts of Foucault’s biopower and biopolitics. The book locates the exercise of these concepts in the building of a world “ empire” by the world’s economic and political

powers. Other aspects concerning the political element of biopower are contained in works regarding its implications on gender, the environment and aging among others. Available literature on various biopower technologies also explores genetic engineering, biotechnology and biomedicine.

III. Methodology

This work is intended to be a descriptive paper on biopower and its use in society. Because it only serves as an overview, it does not forward any position with regards to ethical considerations. Available literature – journals, books and articles are used in order to provide a balanced and up-to-date discussion on the subject.

IV. Data Analysis

What is Biopower?

The term biopower is traced to the sociologist and philosopher Michel Foucault. It is defined as power that is derived from the use of technology in order to control life – its biological processes and the decisions that pertain to living or dying (Dean, 2004). This power extends not only over individual humans but over whole populations. Biopower is often advanced as a way of improving human conditions of defined groups.

However, the capacity to exercise biopower at a societal level lies in the hands of institutions in society. The state, as the supreme political institution, defines what is beneficial for human existence and how this will be achieved (Dean, 2004). It then formulates policies and programs for implementation and has a wide range of resources for it.

The revolutions in science and technology, the development of life and population sciences and the advent of war and genocide have the concept of biopower in their very foundations. Hence, biopower has taken both biological (called eugenics) and political (called biopolitics) dimensions.

Eugenics

At the core of eugenics is the application of the theory of natural selection to society. Eugenics is a field of inquiry that seeks to develop interventions in the genetic structure of man (as well as other life forms) in order to produce a superior species in terms of health, capacity and intellect (Wikipedia, 2008). Selective breeding has taken form in genetic engineering and modern population control methods among others.

Eugenics in the Pre-World War II and World War II Era

Scientists, academicians and policy makers who espouse eugenics argue that it is a social obligation to advance its study because it directly benefits mankind. This position has led to cases of state-enforced sterilization of people in order to stop the reproduction of life of perceived genetically inferior parents (Wikipedia, 2008). This has also led to the practice of euthanasia for individuals with severely reduced human functioning and to genocidal tendencies affecting races or ethnics groups that are also perceived as inferior.

Nazi Germany is a case in point. Two decades prior to World War II, they enforced the mass sterilization of hundreds of thousands of people classified as not fit. The disabled also became victims in their thousands to “mercy-killings” (Wikipedia, 2008). The German ideology of white supremacy led

them to perform racial cleansing activities, killing millions of Jews in concentration camps. Gruesome genetic experiments using human subjects were also tolerated.

From 1934 to 1953, Japan likewise instituted forced sterilization on criminals and peoples with certain diseases in order to reduce criminality and illness. Inter-racial marriages were strictly prohibited. During the Second World War, Japan also created and segregated prostitution camps for soldiers of the Allied Powers in order to prevent the further mix of Japanese and foreign genes (Wikipedia, 2008).

In Australia, eugenics was targeted at aboriginal peoples. During the early 1900's up to the 1950's, aboriginal babies and children were taken by state-mandated force from their families and were made to live in supervised institutions until they reach the age of 16 (Wikipedia, 2008). This policy was based on racial supremacy which saw aborigines as an inferior race that has to benefit from interventions in order to survive physically and culturally.

In the United States, numerous state-wide eugenic laws also prohibited interracial marriages (miscegenation) and enforced sterilization of the sick and disabled beginning in the late 1800's up to 1967. Discrimination with regards to social services was also practiced because of the opinion that the poor, because they are inferior, are a waste of resources and should be left to suffer from their own deficiencies (Wikipedia, 2008).

Modern Eugenics

In the period following World War II, trials were held to indict eugenic practices such as the holocaust and other atrocities. The United Nations,

especially with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has set the social and moral boundaries for medical, social and military practices regarding human life (Wikipedia, 2008). As such, the majority of eugenic state policies worldwide were repealed, though some still continued until the 1970's.

The resurgence of eugenics began in the 1980's, brought about by the development of genetics and molecular biology as a science. Caution has so far characterized modern eugenics because of its history. More than explicit racial supremacy and the use of force, eugenicists today invoke social responsibility through conformity with ethical standards and modern technology along with individual choice (Wikipedia, 2008).

The Human Genome Project that began in 1990 is an international effort to determine how to manipulate human genes in order to eliminate disease or facilitate medication. Sperm banks, with samples taken from males screened to ensure that they are intellectually superior, have also been put up in some countries. The United States has further instituted a voluntary sterilization program for financially challenged families.

In Cyprus, Jewish Communities as well as the United States, voluntary genetic testing is a requisite to marriage or before the conception of a baby. The aim is to prevent the transference of debilitating or incurable diseases to future children. Modern prenatal tests can now determine the genetic make-up of the fetus and mothers have the option for abortion if their babies are diagnosed with certain diseases (Wikipedia, 2008).

Biopolitics

Biopolitics has been associated by Foucault with neoliberalism, which according to (Krishner, 2007), “ultimately subjugates all aspects of the social sphere to the economic domain”. Health and life itself has come with a price where private entities such as insurance, pharmaceutical and biotech corporations provide in return. A key issue in the United States is the state use of biopower to ensure the life of some and deny it from others.

Healthcare and Biopower

Insurance systems are technologies that create an insured and uninsured distinction across the population, where the insured are the financially able and the uninsured the poorer segment of society (Kirshner, 2007). The promotion of life is seen in its health and security benefits: access to health care/protection against diseases; owning a car/mobility; mortgage/property ownership and fallback in the face of accidents and other disastrous events (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2006).

Further, insurance itself determines the lifestyles and behaviors of the insured by laying down policies that prevent them from engaging in lifestyles that pose great risks to health, i. e. smoking or drinking or to fabricate information (Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2006). This “preferred life” serves to further promote their health and well-being.

Recently, insurance companies adopted genetic means of determining disease so that health is established primarily through the condition of molecules in the body. The molecularization of medicine has led to diagnoses of diseases that are prone to errors. An example often cited is the categorization of alcoholism as a brain disease as opposed to its status as an

addiction or a disease that involves human self control (Rocher, n. d., p. 4). Drugs were then manufactured to alter the molecular states of the brain that are presumed to lead to alcohol craving.

In this case, one's choice of medical intervention has been narrowed down to none. Rocher (n. d., p. 4) presented an analysis that the “ molecularization involves the study of life using complex and expensive equipment and since most of the research in the life sciences today is conducted in labs that are funded by pharmaceutical companies and biotech enterprises, profit becomes the primary motivation for continuing research and development of knowledge”.

Contention on a sociological basis is based on the questions “ Who defines health? Who determines disease? Who determines its interventions? Who determines who will have access to these interventions?”. The disadvantaged are the ones who need health care the most and yet because of its state-mandated privatization, it has been denied them (Kirshner, n. d.).

Hence, biopolitics has fostered life for the economically privileged while neglecting those living in poverty levels. The state and private enterprise has established whose lives count (the insured) and whose lives don't (the bare life of the uninsured). State neglect of the latter is then rationalized through healthcare laws and policies that require insurance as a means of coverage.

Biopower and Anti-terrorism

Beyond national borders, the politics of biopower today is condensed in what Reid and Farquhar (2005) have stated as the “ mastery of war (by powerful states) in the name of a commitment to the promotion and enablement of

life”. This statement encapsulates the current drive against terrorism – engagement in war to promote homeland security. However, there have been two methods that have been widely used by states to combat terrorism:

The imposition of birth control measures in the third world as part of Structural Adjustment Programs that these countries have to agree to in order to avail of much needed foreign aid is another biopower issue (Duffield, 2005). Because the third world poor present a “ risk” to the security of developed nations when the former seek the alternatives of Islamic Extremism or social revolution for their “ emancipation”, reducing the population decreases such risk.

The extreme position is in the covert development and use of organisms as weapons in what we refer today as biological warfare. Biotechnology is used to produce such agents as the poliovirus, smallpox, anthrax, ebola and the Spanish flu and create health problems out of food (The Sunshine Project, 2004). Ethnic specific genetic markers made available through the mapping of the human genome also pose a long list of possibilities in how to debilitate whole populations in the future.

V. Results and Discussion

Biopower is a sovereign power over life and death of people in society and the world. More than its biological dimension, the political element of biopower determines if it is positively or negatively used. Historical evidence has pointed to the state use of biopower in fascist and other enforced acts that are now considered an impingement to the human rights to life, liberty

and dignity. In this sense, the power to promote life always exists alongside the power to ordain death. Current use of biopower points to more complex issues involving technology, corporate entities and terrorism.

VI. Conclusion

Biopower is truly something to be frightened about if it is used as a means to neglect life towards its end. Because biopower is an authority wielded by the state, especially the developed states, these institutions have the capacity to determine the survival of populations within and beyond their national borders.

On a domestic level, the current state of economy and politics where governments have relinquished direct control over social and economic matters to business, security and life is now determined by one's economic standing. Hence, biopower has pushed the underprivileged individuals and countries to a more severe disadvantage. The forces of natural selection are once again at play and the social, political and ethical questions that stem from the exercise of biopower remain.