Introduction

THE NOTION OF biopolitics has recently become a buzzword. A few years ago it was known only to a limited number of experts, but it is used today in many different disciplines and discourses. Beyond the limited domain of specialists, it is also attracting increasing interest among the general public. The term is used to discuss political asylum policies, as well as the prevention of AIDS and questions of demographic change. Biopolitics may refer to issues as diverse as financial support for agricultural products, promotion of medical research, legal regulations on abortion, and advance directives of patients specifying their preferences concerning life-prolonging measures.¹

There is a range of diverse and often conflicting views about both the empirical object and the normative evaluation of biopolitics. Some argue strongly that “biopolitics” is necessarily bound to rational decision-making and the democratic organization of social life, while others link the term to eugenics and racism. The term figures prominently in texts of the Old Right, but it is also used by representatives of the New Left. It is used by both critics and advocates of biotechnological progress, by committed Marxists and unapologetic racists. A third line of disagreement concerns historical definitions and delimitations. Does biopolitics go back to antiquity or even to the advent of agriculture? Or, by contrast, is biopolitics the result of contemporary biotechnological innovations marking the beginning of a new era?
Plural and divergent meanings are undoubtedly evoked when people refer to biopolitics. This is surprising, since it is quite clear what the word literally signifies. It denotes a politics that deals with life (Greek: ἄνευ). But this is where the problems start. What some people take to be a trivial fact (“Doesn’t all politics deal with life?”) marks a clear-cut criterion of exclusion for others. For the latter, politics is situated beyond biological life. From this point of view, “biopolitics” has to be considered an oxymoron, a combination of two contradictory terms. The advocates of this position claim that politics in the classical sense is about common action and decision-making and is exactly what transcends the necessities of bodily experience and biological facts and opens up the realm of freedom and human interaction.

This book seeks to bring clarity to this discussion by offering general orientation on the topic of biopolitics. Since this is the first introduction to this subject, I cannot rely on previous works or an established canon. Furthermore, biopolitics constitutes a theoretical and empirical field that crosses conventional disciplinary boundaries and undermines the traditional academic and intellectual division of labor. This introduction therefore has two objectives. On the one hand, it seeks to provide a systematic overview of the history of the notion of biopolitics; on the other hand, it explores its relevance in contemporary theoretical debates.

To avoid a possible misunderstanding, it should be made clear that this book does not intend to offer a neutral account or an objective representation of the diverse historical and contemporary meanings of “biopolitics.” Defining biopolitics and determining its meaning is not a value-free activity that follows a universal logic of research. Rather, it is an integral part of a shifting and conflicting theoretical and political field. Each answer to the question of what processes and structures, what rationalities and technologies, what epochs and historical eras could be called “biopolitical” is always and inevitably the result of a selective perspective. In this respect, each definition of
biopolitics must sharpen its analytical and critical profile against the blind spots and weak points of competing suggestions.

My point of departure is the virtual polarization that is attached to the merger of life and politics entailed in biopolitics. Existing understandings differ with respect to which part of the word they emphasize. It is possible to distinguish naturalistic concepts that take life as the basis of politics and to contrast these with politicist concepts, which conceive of life processes as the object of politics. The former constitute a heterogeneous group of theories that I present in chapter 1. The spectrum runs from organicist concepts of the state in the first decades of the 20th century through racist modes of reasoning during National Socialism to biologistic ideas in contemporary political science. The politicist antipode configures biopolitics as a domain of practice or a subdiscipline of politics, aiming at the regulation and steering of life processes. Since the 1960s this line of interpretation has existed essentially in two different forms: first, as an ecological biopolitics that pursues conservative and defensive objectives and seeks to bind politics to the preservation and protection of the natural environment and, second, in a technical reading of biopolitics whose advocates are more interested in dynamic development and productivist expansion than in preservation and protection. The latter defines a new field of politics that is emerging as a result of new medical and scientific knowledge and biotechnological applications. This interpretation is especially popular nowadays, and is regularly cited in political discussions and media debates to describe the social and political implications and potential of biotechnological innovations. I present the different dimensions of the politicist discourse in chapter 2.

The central thesis of the book is that both lines of interpretation fail to capture essential dimensions of biopolitical processes. Apart from their obvious differences, the politicist and the naturalist position share some basic assumptions. Both conceptions are based on the idea of a stable hierarchy and an external relationship between
life and politics. The advocates of naturalism regard life as being “beneath” politics, directing and explaining political reasoning and action. The politicist conception sees politics as being “above” life processes; here, politics is more than “pure” biology, going beyond the necessities of natural existence. Each fundamental position on the problem of biopolitics relies on the stability of one pole of the semantic field in order to explain variations in the other pole. Either biology accounts for politics, or politics regulates biology. However, this means that both conceptions fail to explain the instability and fragility of the border between “life” and “politics”—and it is exactly this instability that has prompted so many people to employ the notion of biopolitics. Since the two approaches take “life” and “politics” as isolated phenomena, they are both unable to account for their relationality and historicity. The emergence of the notion of biopolitics signals a double negation (cf. Nancy 2002): in contrast to naturalist positions, life does not represent a stable ontological and normative point of reference. The impact of biotechnological innovations has demonstrated that life processes are transformable and controllable to an increasing degree, which renders obsolete any idea of an intact nature untouched by human action. Thus, nature can only be regarded as part of nature-society associations. At the same time, it has become clear that biopolitics also marks a significant transformation of politics. Life is not only the object of politics and external to political decision-making; it affects the core of politics—the political subject. Biopolitics is not the expression of a sovereign will but aims at the administration and regulation of life processes on the level of populations. It focuses on living beings rather than on legal subjects—or, to be more precise, it deals with legal subjects that are at the same time living beings.

Against the naturalist and the politicist reading I propose a relational and historical notion of biopolitics that was first developed by the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. 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. “Biopolitics” in Foucault’s work signals a break in the order of politics: “the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques” (1980, 141–142). Foucault’s concept of biopolitics assumes the dissociation and abstraction of life from its concrete physical bearers. The objects of biopolitics are not singular human beings but their biological features measured and aggregated on the level of populations. This procedure makes it possible to define norms, establish standards, and determine average values. As a result, “life” has become an independent, objective, and measurable factor, as well as a collective reality that can be epistemologically and practically separated from concrete living beings and the singularity of individual experience.

From this perspective, the notion of biopolitics refers to the emergence of a specific political knowledge and new disciplines such as statistics, demography, epidemiology, and biology. These disciplines make it possible to analyze processes of life on the level of populations and to “govern” individuals and collectives by practices of correction, exclusion, normalization, disciplining, therapeutics, and optimization. Foucault stresses that in the context of a government of living beings, nature does not represent an autonomous domain that has to be respected by governmental action but depends on the practices of government itself. Nature is not a material substratum to which practices of government are applied but the permanent correlative of those practices. The ambivalent political figure “population” plays a decisive role in this process. On the one hand, population represents a collective reality that is not dependent on political intervention but is characterized by its own dynamics and modes of self-regulation; this autonomy, on the other hand, does not imply an absolute limit to political intervention but is, on the contrary, the privileged reference of those interventions.
The discovery of a “nature” of the population (e.g., rates of birth and death, diseases, etc.) that might be influenced by specific incentives and measures is the precondition for directing and managing it. Chapter 3 discusses the different dimensions of the notion of biopolitics in the work of Foucault. In the following chapters, I present lines of reception and correctives emanating from Foucault’s concept of biopolitics.

Giorgio Agamben’s writings and the works of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri are certainly the most prominent contributions to a reformulation of Foucault’s notion of biopolitics. Their respective theories assign a strategic role to demarcation and delimitation. According to Agamben, it is the basic separation of “bare life”—the form of existence reduced to biological functions—and political existence that has shaped Western political history since antiquity. He argues that the constitution of sovereign power requires the production of a biopolitical body and that the institutionalization of law is inseparably connected to the exposure of “bare life.” Hardt and Negri diagnose a new stage of capitalism that is characterized by the dissolution of the boundaries between economy and politics, production and reproduction. Whereas Agamben criticizes Foucault for neglecting the fact that modern biopolitics rests on a solid basis of a premodern sovereign power, Hardt and Negri hold that Foucault did not recognize the transformation of modern into postmodern biopolitics. Their respective contributions to the discussion are analyzed in chapters 4 and 5.

The following chapters examine two main lines of reception that have taken up Foucault’s work on biopolitics. The first focuses on the mode of politics and asks how biopolitics is to be distinguished historically and analytically from “classical” forms of political representation and articulation. In chapter 6, I concentrate on a discussion of the works of Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, who observe a regression of politics resulting from the increasing significance of biopolitical issues. Then I present Anthony Giddens’s concept of life politics.
(which does not explicitly refer to Foucault) and Didier Fassin’s idea of biolegitimacy.

The second strand of thought focuses on the *substance of life*. Scholars working along these lines ask how the foundations, means, and objectives of biopolitical interventions have been transformed by a biotechnologically enhanced access to the processes of life and the human body. Looking more closely at the work of these scholars in chapter 7, I discuss concepts of molecular politics, thanatopolitics, and anthropopolitics and the ideas of “biosociality” (Paul Rabinow) and “ethopolitics” (Nikolas Rose).

Chapter 8 is devoted to a neglected area of biopolitics. It presents a series of theoretical concepts which suggest that biopolitics cannot be separated from the economization of life. The approaches covered include the idea of an “economy of humans” (*Menschenökonomie*) developed by the Austrian social theorist and sociologist Rudolf Goldscheid at the beginning of the 20th century. This is followed by the concept of a “vital politics” as promoted by German liberals after World War II and the theory of human capital developed by the Chicago School. The final section focuses on visions of a “bioeconomy” in contemporary political action plans and some recent empirical studies that critically evaluate the relations between biotechnological innovations and transformations in capitalism. Chapter 9 integrates the diverse refinements of and amendments to the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics into an “analytics of biopolitics.” I seek to demonstrate the theoretical importance of this research perspective. Finally, I show how this analytical framework differs from bioethical discourse.

If these sometimes quite heterogeneous chapters have become a whole and if the result is a “lively” introduction (meaning a vivid and comprehensive presentation) to the field of biopolitics, this is due to a number of readers and colleagues who have helped me with their suggestions and comments. I received important ideas and valuable criticism from Martin Saar, Ulrich Bröckling, Robin Celikates,
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