Foucault Studies

REVIEW

Maria Muhle, *Eine Genealogie der Biopolitik. Zum Begriff des Lebens bei Foucault und Canguilhem* **(Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2008), ISBN: 978-3899428582**

The concept of biopolitics is a fluid and multi-layered one, whose signification depends in each case on the definition and articulation of two much contested notions: 'politics' and 'life.' In a recent study which deals with the history of this concept,[1] Thomas Lemke distinguishes between two classical ways of understanding it: either biological life is considered as the very basis of politics (the 'naturalistic' conception: organicism or racism) or it is understood as the object of political interventions (biopolitics as a specific 'domain' of politics). Despite their strict opposition, these two perspectives share a common ground: in both conceptions, 'life' and 'politics' are seen as autonomous spheres whose connection does not transform the nature of the relata. For Lemke, that is precisely what the Foucaldian genealogy of biopolitics puts into question by revealing the strict interdependency of these two 'domains.' On the one hand, 'life' is defined, framed, modified by politics, i.e. by power techniques and their rationalization within the human sciences. On the other, the entrance on the stage of human beings as a biological species in the middle of the 18th century shaped and transformed the meaning of the political itself.

Maria Muhle's *Eine Genealogie der Biopolitik. Zum Begriff des Lebens bei Foucault und Canguilhem* is an original contribution to the question of the relationship between 'life' and 'politics' in Foucault, whose rather inconsistent use of the notion of biopolitics, from *Il faut défendre la société* to *La naissance de la biopolitique*, makes necessary a philosophical clarification.

The book emphasizes the potential of the Foucaldian concept in contrast to its quasi-vitalistic (Hardt/Negri) or pessimistic (Agamben) reception. Muhle criticizes Hardt and Negri because of their naive opposition between a repressive, transcendent-sovereign 'biopower' and an emancipatory, immanent-collective 'biopolitics.' Like Deleuze in his *Foucault*, Hardt and Negri assign to life in *Multitude* an unruly and resistant force *in itself*, which according to Muhle, perpetuates the phantasm of the existence of a 'pure,' innocent, revolutionary power. (21-22) The author also rejects Agamben's pessimistic thesis in *Homo Sacer*, which states that the production of a biopolitical substance, 'bare life' is the constitutive and repressed origin of Western sovereign power, as much in its totalitarian as in its democratic forms. (38-55) Whereas Agamben attempts to outline a *genesis* or an *archaeology* of the foundations of Western

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[1] Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitik zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2007). English translation to come: *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

power that leads to the discovery of a static, quasi-ontological substance, 'bare life', the Foucaldian *genealogy* understands 'life' as a secondary, *determinable* concept: a simple historical *correlate* of concrete power and knowledge structure. (55-60) Concentration camps and National Socialism *do not* reveal the 'true face' of political modernity. Instead, they are the specific product of the crossing of racist theories and of the absolute militarization of society. This paradoxical combination of sovereign power and bio-power in state-led racism *should not* be considered as structurally necessary, but as *historically contingent*.

The rest of the book attempts to flesh out this claim, and to this end reconstructs three historical models of the relationship between power and life, although only in bio-power does life becomes a political category. Muhle distinguishes between the sovereign, the disciplinary, and the biopolitical forms of power. These three models not only relate to three different concepts of life, but also to three modes of functioning. The central claim is that in biopolitics life is not just *the target*, power's field of intervention (biopolitics in a restricted sense), but also describes *the way* the power governs populations (biopolitics in an expanded sense). Biopower is a 'living power,' it *imitates* the logic of the living. The originality of Muhle's work consists in describing this logic with Georges Canguilhem's concept of 'living normativity' (*normativité du vivant*) which acts as a metaphorical figure to think the specificity of biopolitics.

First, Muhle examines the difference between 'negative' and 'positive' power which culminates, in *La volonté de savoir*, in the distinction between the negative sovereign power 'to make die and let live' and the positive biopower 'to make live and let die.' The right to life and death of the sovereign power is in the modern theory of natural right a relatively limited one: it is only legitimated by the defence of sovereignty and territory. But this legal model of power has no 'active' access to life, it is only a power to kill, to appropriate, to extort riches, resources, goods and labour (*droit de prise*). In the passage from the classical age to the modern age, Foucault locates another kind of interaction between power and life, which is based on incitation, control, supervision and an increase of living forces – in short, a more 'intimate' mode of life-domination. In *La volonté de savoir*, Foucault designates the structure of biopower, which becomes visible through the 'sexual dispositif' in the 19th century, as a combination of discipline (the anatomico-politics of the human body) and a biopolitics of population (regulatory control of the species body). The first technology of power organizes the submission and subject-becoming (*assujetissement*) of individuals, i.e. their *dressage* within institutions like the family or school, in particular through the control of sexual behaviour. The second one does not intervene directly on individual bodies, but on populations and their environments, understood as global biological phenomena, distinct from the *peuple des citoyens*, with its own characteristics like birth- and death-rate, public health, average life, as well as its own devices of measurement such as statistics and probability calculations. (21-30)

Discipline and biopolitics are for Muhle two radically different models of power that however are not clearly distinguished in *La Volonté de savoir*. This distinction is made only in the first lectures of *Securité, Territoire, Population*: what Foucault designates there as

'security dispositif' and which is considered as an essential part of liberal governmentality, is for Muhle *the same* as biopolitics (237-281); different words, same concept. This extension of the concept of biopolitics is made possible because Muhle understands life not just as the target of biopower (the restricted sense), but also as its model of functioning (the expanded sense). Whereas discipline concentrates, focuses and encloses, security (biopolitics) constantly widens its scope. Discipline regulates everything and security tends to 'let things happen.' Law focuses on prohibition, discipline on prescription, and security responds at the level of reality in order to regulate phenomena. Whereas disciplinary power subjects human bodies to an *external* norm and forces them into mechanism-like behaviours (*normation*), biopower tries to 'govern' populations starting from their inner norms (*normalisation*). (241-247) Muhle's claim is that the condition of possibility of this 'living' model of power and of the constitution of its intervention field, the 'population', is a *biological concept of the living*, as it has been developed since 1800.

Canguilhem's history of biology reconstructs this new concept. According to him, the originality of the 'living fact' (*fait vital*) as a biological fact consists in the production of specific *norms*, which have nothing to do with the *laws* of natural sciences. Indeed, the universality and invariance of physical laws can for example *not* comprehend phenomenona such as anomalies, deviances, and the possibility of therapy. (89-96) However, it does not mean that modern biology returns to an aristotelian tradition in which a living *telos* is pre-inscribed in every organism. The new discipline, blooming around 1800, in fact breaks with both reductive conceptions of life: that of organism as fully determined by external, physical conditions *or* as fully determined by an internal 'programme.' The norms of a biological organism are in fact historical and variable. They cannot be set *a priori* because they are, as the French physiologist Xavier Bichat (1771-1802) claimed, the product of a perpetual conflict between the organism and its environment, between the organism and death, diseases, i.e. 'negatives values.'

The specific contribution of Canguilhem to the epistemology of modern biology consists in understanding the biological 'vital norm,' not only as an optimal mode of organic self-regulation, but also as a normative force. The normal state of an organism in its relation to its environment, its self-conservation, is to be considered as the *product* of this *inner normativity*: organisms do not simply *adapt* to their environment but *transform* and *produce* it too. (159) Biological life does not simply have norms of its own, it *creates* them too. This explains the possibility that life can 'fail.' Nevertheless, this does not mean that errors and anomalies are in themselves 'negative values', i.e. pathological. In the pathological state, the 'living normativity' of an organism is in fact reduced to one of its poles, that of self-conservation. A 'normal norm' is the one which expresses stability, fertility, and a variability of life in an equivalent or superior degree compared to a previously existing norm. The anomaly may, therefore, *become* a disease but it is not *in itself* disease. Anomalies and mutations prove the diversity of life, its multiple possibilities. In some cases, they can grow and 'normalize' if they optimize the functioning of the organism.

The *dynamic polarity* of living normativity, between bare self-conservation and self-surpassing, between normality and normativity, between the existing norm and its productive deviance, is central in Muhle's conception of biopolitics. Canguilhem himself, in the *Nouvelles Réflexions sur le normal et le pathologique*, strictly distinguished between vital and social norms. In his later work, he revisited his previous vitalism and refused to equate the functioning of societies to that of biological organisms inasmuch as societies do not have any intrinsic finality, any immanent dispositif. *Autopoeisis*, in the human world, has to be consciously and reflexively generated: societies are machines which work *like* organisms, but they are *not* organisms. Similarly, the Foucaldian concept of biopolitics functions on the paradoxical model of an 'inner externality' (*innere Äußerlichkeit*) or of a 'natural artificiality' (*natürliche Künstlichkeit)*. In order to govern life, biopolitics imitates the logic of the living without being a 'politics of life.'

In the conclusion, Muhle underlines two aspects of this living logic. (261-263) First, the goal of biopolitics is to guarantee the security of a population *as a whole*. For this reason, it can tolerate 'deviances' and 'mutations' of the existing norms and make them productive, as long they do not threaten the global order. Secondly, biopolitical techniques tend to create a setting in which the population can optimally regulate itself. Biopower, contrary to discipline, does not intervene directly on the organisms, but on its environment (*milieu)*. It controls and organizes the natural-social conditions of development of a population: the health coverage system, the pension system, and the politics of habitat.

Against a new conservative tendency in Foucauldian studies of governmentality, Muhle does not take biopower or liberal governmentality to be a 'good' form of power, or as a positive 'politics of life,' but as a subtle and very efficient mechanism of domination. However, her critical impetus fades away rather quickly in her use of Canguilhem's vitalist conceptuality. Biological metaphors, in spite of the precautions of the author ('formal analogy,' 'as if' etc.), tend to *biologize* social processes and thus to reinforce the logic of power that the author criticizes. This mode of conceptuality seems indeed to offer no possibility of real resistance against a living and dynamic power which can absorb and use every deviant behaviour to its own advantage. These life metaphorics may provide a key for grasping the subtlety and specificity of this new form of power but they do not constitute a conceptual instrument with which to analyze it.

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