

## REVIEW

**Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-0814752425**

It is often tempting to attribute certain neologisms to Foucault, who is widely regarded a great inventor of concepts. The work of Thomas Lemke has consistently demonstrated that Foucault's genius lies not in inventing a term, but in formulating an entirely novel use for it. For instance, his previous work<sup>1</sup> showed that, whereas "governmentality" is now almost exclusively associated with Foucault, it was the French semiologist Roland Barthes who first articulated an understanding of governmentality, one which Foucault would significantly depart from as he sought to develop a historical and, later, a distinctive analytical approach to the study of governmentality.

In addition to providing a vast survey of the different theoretical reactions to Foucault's understanding of "biopolitics" among a diverse set of philosophers, literary theorists, sociologists and anthropologists, Lemke's *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* reveals that, to an even greater degree than the notion of "governmentality," there is a complex genealogy of "biopolitics," one which considerably predates (by approximately 50 years) Foucault's adoption of the notion. Once again, Lemke's work shows how Foucault's methodological approach signals a radical departure from earlier formulations—in this case "naturalist" and "politician" understandings of biopolitics.

Much of the value of this 'introductory' book on biopolitics comes from the empirical findings of its genealogy, wherein Lemke traces how the concept of biopolitics was deployed before and outside of Foucault in a number of intellectual and political contexts. The empirical study is primarily focused on Germany, a nation where there have been a myriad of uses of biopolitics, as it has circulated in various medical, scientific, religious, political and ethical discourses.

For the purposes of this review, I will address the principal findings of this genealogy, before proceeding to briefly discuss Lemke's theoretical innovations in the field of biopolitics. To be sure, much is to be further gained from reading the later chapters wherein Lemke develops several insightful and original criticisms of Foucault's more well-known interlocutors of the biopolitics problematic, namely Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sa-*

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Lemke, "An Indigestible Meal? Foucault, Governmentality and State Theory," *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 2, (2007), 43-64.

cer as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*. Indeed, even though his work was the object of several criticisms, Hardt contributes a blurb on the book's back cover, describing it as "essential reading" for anyone interested in biopolitics. On Lemke's survey and critique of these interlocutors alone, I would agree with the assessment, one which is augmented by the genealogy which will be of immense interest to anyone working with the notion of biopolitics.

My main criticism with the book concerns its organization, as the genealogy of biopolitics, so successfully carried out in the first part, was entirely left out of the second part of the book, which consists of an extensive survey of the current philosophical and "social scientific" literature. I think the genealogy could have been more readily and clearly linked to the survey, and the study of their linkage might reveal significant continuities between Foucault's contemporary interlocutors and naturalist or politicist versions of biopolitics. Determining how "naturalist" and "politicist" assumptions continue to underlie the different philosophical and social scientific approaches as opposed to others remains a pressing intellectual task for anyone seeking to articulate (or anticipate) a normative concept of "life." It remains unclear, however, whether one can derive such an understanding through Lemke's analytics of biopolitics.

The naturalist and politicist formulations of biopolitics are the respective focus of the first two chapters, which constitute, more or less, the genealogy of biopolitics in Germany. Lemke situates the emergence of biopolitics within a broader intellectual setting, the *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) movement of the late nineteenth century. He cites the works of Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson as its major representatives. While admitting that these thinkers represent quite diverse theoretical positions, Lemke argues that "[t]hey shared, however, the re-evaluation of "life" and its adoption as a fundamental category and normative criterion of the healthy, the good, and the true." (9)

The exact links between this philosophical tendency and the invention of biopolitics are not made direct; Lemke's genealogy of the concept begins with the work of Rudolf Kjellén, a Swedish political scientist who is more often celebrated as the inventor of "geopolitics" than "biopolitics." Kjellén's organic theory of the state is the first "naturalist" formulation of biopolitics, which viewed the state "as a form of life" permeated by different conflicts and struggles. These necessitate systematic study. He wrote: "In view of this tension typical of life itself... the inclination arose in me to baptize this discipline after the special science of biology as biopolitics;... in the civil war between social groups one realizes all too clearly the ruthlessness of the life struggle for existence and growth, while at the same time one can detect within the groups a powerful cooperation for the purposes of existence."<sup>2</sup> Lemke goes on to trace the trajectory of the naturalist conception of biopolitics as it is articulated by a range of authorities and forms of expertise in Germany from the

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<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Kjellén, *Grundriß zu einem System der Politik* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel Verlag 1920), 93-94, cited in Lemke, 2011, 10.

time of Kjellén to the conclusion of the Second World War. He provides many concrete examples of “naturalist” formulations of biopolitics, such as when it was invoked in a speech by the President of the Reich Health Department—“our biopolitics”—during the Nazi era. But what is most important about Lemke’s genealogy is not the interesting examples he uncovers, so much as his overall critique of the naturalist formulation:

The basic assumption is that all social, political, and legal bonds rest on a living whole, which embodies the genuine and eternal, the healthy, and the valuable. The reference to “life” serves here both as a mythic starting point and as a normative guideline. Furthermore, it eludes every rational foundation or democratic decision-making. From this perspective, only a politics that orients itself towards biological laws and takes them as a guideline can count as legitimate and commensurate with reality. (11)

When tied to such a restrictive understanding of life, the naturalist conception of biopolitics is untenable; having “life” as the basis of politics is dangerous because it excludes other, broader, or perhaps even better understandings of ‘life.’ This is among the central insights provided by Lemke’s genealogy; other insights concern the “politician” versions of biopolitics, those which attempt to transform life into an object of politics. There are several specific formulations which Lemke’s genealogy covers, but he diagnoses two main politician variants: “ecological biopolitics” and “technocentric biopolitics.”

Lemke makes several interesting assertions about ecological biopolitics that might be usefully compared to other national contexts. He argues that life is no longer the basis of politics as in the naturalist conception. With the emergence of ecological biopolitics, life is transformed into an object of politics. He provides a number of interesting examples from German economic and political thought.<sup>3</sup> Most striking in Lemke’s genealogy of German ecological biopolitics, however, is his overall diagnosis: “With the transformation of biology into a practice of engineering, and the possibility of perceiving living organisms not as self-contained and delimited bodies but rather as constructs composed of heterogeneous and exchangeable elements (e.g., organs, tissues, DNA), traditional environmental protection and species conservation efforts are becoming less pertinent.” (27) Such a claim might apply to the German context, but it is important not to universalize it—for instance by describing it in terms of a general shift from “environmentalism to biopolitics.”<sup>4</sup> For his part, Lemke observes a process whereby

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<sup>3</sup> The German political scientist Dietrich Gunst devoted a volume of his *Politics between Power and Law* six-collection to “biopolitics” which he broadly conceives as “anything to do with health policy and the regulation of the population, together with environmental protection and questions concerning the fate of humanity. This political arena in its comprehensive form is comparatively new and takes into consideration the fact that questions about life and survival are increasingly relevant.” (Gunst, 1978, 9; cited in Lemke 2011, 24).

<sup>4</sup> Walter Truett Anderson, *To Govern Evolution: Further Adventures of the Political Animal* (Boston: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 94, cited in Lemke 2011, 28.

the ecological version of biopolitics was weakened until ultimately it was integrated into the technocentric variant. If the former assigned itself a task that tended toward the conservative and defensive, pursuing the goal of preserving natural foundations of life, the latter is more dynamic and productivist, concerned with the exploitation of these foundations. The ecological interpretation of biopolitics was in this respect locked into a naturalistic logic, as it strove to thematize the interaction between natural and societal processes and so to determine the correct political answers to environmental questions. Central to the technocentric version of biopolitics, however, is not the adaptation of “society” to a separate “natural environment” but rather the environment’s modification and transformation through scientific and technological means. (28)

Not one to succumb to sweeping generalizations, Lemke does recognize that concrete and defined empirical analyses are required to discern the multiple and sometimes overlapping trajectories of ecological and technocentric biopolitics.

From reading Lemke’s genealogy, one realizes that there are many discourses on biopolitics outside of Foucault. However, it is to Foucault’s methods and approaches to biopolitics that Lemke ultimately turns. Whereas naturalist and politicist versions “are based on the idea of a stable hierarchy and an external relationship between life and politics,” (9-10) Foucault approaches biopolitics historically and relationally, which enables a detailed analysis of the shifting border between life and politics, which in turn “is less an origin than an effect of political action.” (31-32) Although Foucault’s constant shifts in methodological approach leads him to advance three interpretations of biopolitics, which Lemke covers in considerable detail, the ultimate importance of Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics rests, for Lemke, with the emergence of the “living subject” in modern political rationalities. This coincides with the rise of liberalism, and Lemke’s account is one of the clearest in explaining the rather oblique historical connections Foucault perceived between biopolitics and liberalism. “With liberalism, but not before, the question arises of how subjects are to be governed if they are both legal persons and living beings.” (48)

By its very nature, an introduction is meant to be brief and concise, and Lemke does manage to cover a considerable amount of empirical and theoretical ground in this short book. It is only at the end of the book that he advances an analytics of “biopolitics” as a “prospective” methodological approach, offering a number of valuable and provocative questions to guide future research. It currently remains unclear as to how this novel approach might contribute to the task confronting the intellectual today, beyond offering a description of it as a “problematizing and creative task that links diagnosis of the contemporary with an orientation to the future, while at the same time destabilizing apparently natural or self-evident modes of practice or 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.” (123) So that it can react to the possibilities that an analytics of biopolitics diagnoses, Lemke’s *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* will hopefully be complemented by subsequent empirical analyses as well as theoretic-

tico-philosophical works which offers an understanding of life without appealing to “naturalist” or “politicist” arguments. If such a possibility even exists, would an analytics of biopolitics pursue it, thereby continuing the tradition of the *Lebensphilosophie* out of which the notion of biopolitics arose?

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