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Luther and Biopower: Rethinking the Reformation with Foucault

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ABSTRACT. In this article, we propose an alternative Foucauldian reading of Martin Luther's thought and early Lutheranism. Michel Foucault did not mention the Reformation often, although he saw it as an amplification of pastoral power and the governing of people's everyday lives. We aim to fill the gap in his analysis by outlining the disciplinary and biopolitical aspects in Luther and early Lutheranism. Therefore, we also contribute to the ongoing debate regarding the birth of biopolitics, which, we argue, predates Foucault's periodisation. Our approach to tackling these questions is three-pronged. First, we establish the context by highlighting a few Reformation-era examples of the conceptual opposite of biopower, namely, sovereign power. Second, we scrutinise the disciplinary aspects of early Lutheranism, underscoring the fact that disciplinary institutions appear to subject people to new models of behaviour. Third, we describe the biopolitical undercurrents in Luther's thought and its early reception. We argue that the reformer's views on issues such as marriage and poor relief appear to carry a biopolitical significance before the alleged birth of biopolitics.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, the Reformation, biopolitics, disciplinary power, Martin Luther, Lutheranism

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we seek to highlight instances of biopower, or disciplinary power and biopolitics, in Martin Luther's thought and early Lutheranism. More specifically, our aim is to help develop Michel Foucault's reading of the Reformation and to gather additional evidence to support the claim that the timeline of biopower extends further than Foucault presumed in the first part of *The History of Sexuality* and the relevant lecture series.¹ Our analysis of Luther

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, An Introduction* [1976] (1978), 141. See also Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976* [1997] (2003), 244-245. For claims regarding an

is Foucauldian in the sense that we continue to utilise the French philosopher's toolkit; however, we have chosen to apply it in a manner that seeks to correct his periodisation of biopower. It is well known that Foucault established his revolutionary genealogy of this life affirming power somewhat hastily before leaving the question aside to pursue his other, mostly unrelated interests. This ground-breaking, yet brief analysis left behind many gaps, one of which we wish to explore further.

By biopower, we refer to the allegedly modern technology of power which Foucault analysed during the latter half of the 1970s. It consists of two interrelated strata: first, anatomo-politics or discipline, which focuses on optimising the usefulness and docility of individual bodies,² and, second, biopolitics, which regulates the larger population and the phenomena associated with it – including but not limited to health, reproduction and life expectancies.³ According to Foucault, power manifested itself in a radically different manner before the seventeenth century emergence of disciplinary power and the eighteenth century emergence of biopolitics. This was the era of sovereign power, which revolved around death.⁴ More specifically, the sovereign used their power to either kill or to abstain from killing – or simply to extract resources from their subjects.⁵ Thus their grasp on life was exceedingly limited.

We do not disagree with Foucault's *definition* of these terms – only his periodisation. We are attempting to antedate the history of biopolitics to the Reformation era by showcasing that the socio-political changes ushered in by Luther and early Lutheranism fit the description of disciplinary power and biopolitics before their claimed emergence. Hence, we end up arguing that the existence of biopower coincides with an era that is commonly seen as the pinnacle of sovereign power. Although the biopolitical optimisation of life should still be regarded as the conceptual opposite of the sovereign's deathly might, this does not prevent the two from co-existing during the same historical period. As Foucault notes, the "new" manifestation of power does not replace the "old" one entirely, as witnessed by their hand in hand operation through state racism – or the biopolitical exclusion of certain parts of the population.⁶ Further, as we attempt to showcase in this article, both sovereign power and biopower were clearly rampant during the era of the Reformation.

The work on biopower was by no means Foucault's final attempt at explaining the genealogy of modern power. Very soon after completing the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, the French thinker would move on to construct another approach, which was centred around the notion of governmentality, which he discusses most famously in his *Security, Territory, Population* (1977-1978) lecture series. This approach can be described as an extended history of governing people in ways that fall outside the sovereign power model. The second

extended history of biopolitics, see Mika Ojakangas, *On the Greek Origins of Biopolitics. A Reinterpretation of the History of Biopower* (2016), 1-4; Sergei Prozorov, "When Did Biopolitics Begin? Actuality and Potentiality in Historical Events," *European Journal of Social Theory* 25:4 (2022), 540-541.

² Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1:139. Before integrating it to the analysis of biopower, Foucault had already dealt with disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish*, which precedes *History of Sexuality 1* by a year. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* [1975] (1977).

³ *History of Sexuality*, 1:139.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 135-136.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 241-256.

genealogy begins with “Judeo-Christian” pastoral power (discussed in more detail below)⁷ and leads up to *raison d’État*, and eventually police (science), which begins to finally grasp the novel notion of population.⁸ In *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978–1979) lectures, Foucault continues by describing liberalism as a new type of self-limiting governmentality with notable ties to the question of the population.⁹

Taking cues from those who have claimed that the second approach offers an alternative genealogy to the birth of biopower,¹⁰ we attempt to understand pertinent parts of governmentality through the notion of biopower. This is made possible by analysing the emergence of biopower as a pre-seventeenth and -eighteenth century event. In other words, our task in this article is, on the one hand, to read Luther as a biopolitical thinker and, on the other hand, to use our reading to point out the historical inaccuracy of Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics while preserving the notion’s mostly solid definition. However, we wish to bring an additional degree of coherence to his protean analysis of power relations by stretching the concept of biopower so that it applies to relevant early modern instances of governmentality; more specifically, those which are aimed at optimising life – especially early Lutheran pastoral power. What makes Luther such a suitable figure to discuss in this instance – beyond the fact that his socio-political thought seems to exemplify biopower before its alleged advent – is that applying the notion of biopower to his thought and its reception allows us to pinpoint both the strong and weak qualities of the Foucauldian notion. We would like to argue that the ensuing adjustments can help sharpen the instruments found in the Foucauldian toolkit even further, and that doing so can aid others traverse the contested history of biopower with greater ease.

The need to fill the gaps of Foucault’s analysis also applies to his ideas regarding the Reformation. It appears that whenever the French philosopher discusses Christianity, he often means Catholicism. In fact, certain scholars have gone as far as to claim that Christianity and Catholicism are *almost* equivalent to him.¹¹ “Almost” is the key word here because although it is obvious that the Reformation is by no means Foucault’s main focus, he does discuss it sporadically in his course lectures,¹² including *Security, Territory, Population* (1977–1978), *On the Government of the Living* (1979–1980), *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* (1981), his final course *The Courage of Truth* (1984), the lecture “Christianity and Confession” (1980), which he gave in Dartmouth and Berkley, and the public discussion titled “Discussion of ‘Truth and Subjectivity’” (1980), which was also held at Berkley. In addition, he touches on the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in his books, ranging from *Madness and Civilization* to *The History of Sexuality*. Let us highlight a few of his most relevant arguments.¹³

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* [2004] (2009), 123-125.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 278, 326.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* [2004] (2008), 20–22.

¹⁰ See Alessandro Fontana and Mauro Bertani, “Situating the Lectures” [1997], in “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, by Michel Foucault (2003), 273–274.

¹¹ Mika Ojakangas, “Lutheranism and Nordic Bio-politics,” *Retfærd* 38:3/150 (2015), 5–23.

¹² For an overview of Christianity in Foucault’s later lectures, see Chris Barker, “Foucault’s Anarchaeology of Christianity: Understanding Confession as a Basic Form of Obedience,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 0:0, 1–24.

¹³ One of the anonymous reviewers has kindly informed us that the Bibliothèque nationale de France hosts pertinent archival material from Foucault’s unfinished *History of Sexuality* volume on Christianity titled *La Chair et le corps*, which he later abandoned to work on what we now know as the series’ posthumously published concluding volume, Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh. The History of Sexuality, Volume 4* [2018] (2021). The material in

Foucault's arguably most famous attempt to explain the concurrence of religion and power takes place in *Security, Territory, Population*, where he claims that Christianity had adapted the model of pastoral power – or the metaphor of the watchful shepherd – from previous eastern Mediterranean influences.¹⁴

The shepherd counts the sheep; he counts them in the morning when he leads them to pasture, and he counts them in the evening to see that they are all there, and he looks after each of them individually. He does everything for the totality of his flock, but he does everything also for each sheep of the flock.¹⁵

This manifestation of power affects *omnes et singulatim*, each and every one at once.¹⁶ According to Foucault, the Western conception of (religious) authority should be hence understood as a model of power that regulates its subjects on both individual and general levels. This model is totalising, or as Foucault notes in "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason'" (delivered in 1979): "Everything the shepherd does is geared to the good of his flock. That's his constant concern. When they sleep, *he* keeps watch".¹⁷ It is well known that the shepherd's two-fold approach is similar to that of biopower, where the microlevel approach of discipline focuses on individual bodies whereas the macrolevel of biopolitics captures the entire population.¹⁸ Therefore, it is no surprise that pastoral power and the ensuing larger history of governmentality¹⁹ have been argued to act as the genealogy of biopower.²⁰ The discussion regarding pastoral power is also relevant to our specific question. Foucault claims that the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation intensified pastoral power in both its spiritual and temporal forms: "The pastorate had never intervened so much, had never had such a hold on the material, temporal, everyday life of individuals; it takes charge of a whole series of questions and problems concerning material life, property, and the education of children".²¹ Our hypothesis is that at least some of this novel kind of hold on material life can – and should – be captured through the notion of biopower.

question includes additional engagement with Luther. Unfortunately, we could not make it to the archives; however, we wish to convey the fact that the published works do not provide the complete picture of Foucault's treatment of Luther and the Reformation and that the archival material could be used to supplement it as well as our claims. Foucault's unpublished engagement with Luther can be found in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAF 28730, Box 88, Folder 3, 95–109, 120–122, 143–145, Folder 4, 162–170, and Folder 10, 430.

¹⁴ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 123–125.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 128–129.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason,'" in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Vol. II*, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin (1981), 62.

¹⁸ *History of Sexuality*, 1:139.

¹⁹ Antoon Braeckman has argued that the Reformation should be understood as the linkage between pastoral power and governmentality. See Antoon Braeckman, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Governmentality: An Unwritten Chapter in the Genealogy of the Modern State," *Critical Horizon. A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 23:2 (2022), 134–135.

²⁰ See Fontana and Bertani, "Situating the Lectures," 273–274.

²¹ *Security, Territory, Population*, 229–230; see Jussi Backman, "Self-Care and Total Care: The Twofold Return of Care in Twentieth-Century Thought," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 8:3 (2020), 280. Foucault explains that the Reformation era "pastoral revolts" led to "a kind of re-integration of counter-conduct within a religious pastorate organized either in the Protestant churches or in the Counter Reformation". *Security, Territory, Population*, 303–305; see Barker, "Foucault's Anarchaeology of Christianity," 12.

In *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, Foucault addresses the Reformation in relation to the conflict “between the hermeneutics of the self and the hermeneutics of the text”.²² More specifically, he argues that the new Protestant way of theorising the Scriptures moves the focus away from an institutional authority and toward the self by attempting to amalgamate two distinct approaches to “the truth of the text, I would find it within me; and what I would find within myself would be the truth of the text”.²³ Jouni Tilli continues by highlighting the fact that this shift also reverses the roles in the pastoral relationship – although telling the truth remains a constant in Christianity,²⁴ the confessing (truth-telling) subject of Catholicism becomes a searcher for the truth of the self in Protestantism, whereas the priest assumes the role of a truth-teller.²⁵ Hence, the Reformation and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular appear to usher in the gradual rise of a new conception of the individual, whose conduct is no longer shaped only by centralised power structures; instead, their life is now conducted in a novel manner that emphasises the truth found within oneself.

In “Discussion of ‘Truth and Subjectivity’”, Foucault goes on to provide a few additional remarks on the relationship between the truth and the self. He argues that Luther was the one to highlight this connection, which was virtually non-existent in Catholicism, and that he was keen on combatting “the juridical tradition established in the Catholic Church”.²⁶ Foucault continues by stating that this legal and political tradition was comprised of various forms of confession, as witnessed, for example, in public penitential ceremonies and novel juridical arrangements, which culminated on the criminal confession, and which all had their ties to the Inquisition.²⁷

In *On the Government of the Living*, Foucault makes similar points by claiming that in Protestant theology, “we have a certain way of linking the regime of avowal and the regime of truth that precisely enables Protestantism to reduce the institutional and sacramental practice of penitential avowal, even to the extent of nullifying it”.²⁸ Indeed, one of the key doctrinal elements of Protestantism has to do with the fact that the mediatory role of the priest is no longer necessary. The faithful share a universal priesthood – they can read the Bible and act upon its recommendations. This affects the role of confession, as Foucault notes in *The History of Sexuality* 1. During the Counter-Reformation, the Roman Church had ramped “up the

²² Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling. The Function of the Avowal in Justice* [2012] (2014), 168.

²³ *Ibid.*, 169. Note that in his 1980 lecture “Christianity and Confession”, Foucault emphasises the fact that the two systems are not identical. “Even after Luther, even in Protestantism, the secrets of the soul and the mysteries of the faith, the self and the Book, are not in Christianity enlightened by exactly the same type of light. They demand different methods and put into operation particular techniques”. Michel Foucault, “Christianity and Confession,” in *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College* (2016), 55–56.

²⁴ See Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980* [2012] (2014), 311.

²⁵ Jouni Tilli, “Preaching as Master’s Discourse: A Foucauldian Interpretation of Lutheran Pastoral Power,” *Critical Research on Religion* 7:2 (2019), 124.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, “Discussion of ‘Truth and Subjectivity,’” in *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College* (2016), 95.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 95–96. In a response to another question during the same discussion, Foucault also claims that “Luther and the Counter-Reformation are at the root of modern literature, since modern literature is nothing else but the development of self-hermeneutics”. *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁸ Foucault, *On the Government*, 85.

rhythm of the yearly confession",²⁹ imposed "meticulous rules of self-examination",³⁰ and "attributed more and more importance in penance".³¹ While dealing with the role of confession within the discourse on sex, he writes that "with the rise of Protestantism, the Counter-Reformation, eighteenth century pedagogy, and nineteenth century medicine, it gradually lost its ritualistic and exclusive localization".³²

Jussi Backman underscores the Protestant theologian's despise of the "ascetic and monastic practice as an attempt at 'justification through deeds'"³³ as another element of the Reformation discussed by Foucault. Indeed, in *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault emphasises Luther's doctrine of *sola fide* and the associated argument against the need for asceticism: "The formula of Protestantism is to lead the same life in order to arrive at the other world. It was at that point that Christianity became modern".³⁴ This modern, Protestant way of life is mundane and unassuming – for example, the faithful are no longer required to go on pilgrimages or told to purchase indulgences. Congregations are still led by shepherds tasked with guiding their flocks; however, they no longer require any acts beyond faith. All the above-mentioned changes make it plain to see that the Reformation (and the Counter-Reformation as well as the simultaneous first steps of the modern state) altered the subject radically in the early modern age.³⁵

Mika Ojakangas has made additional remarks regarding Lutheranism, pastoral power and biopolitics. He argues that although Lutheranism itself was not particularly biopolitical, it still played an important role in the history of biopolitics.³⁶ More specifically, he claims that predominantly Lutheran countries provided an exceptionally fertile soil for the development of the welfare state and the implementation of eugenic sterilisation laws, which were stunted in predominantly Catholic and Calvinist countries. According to Ojakangas, the differing responses stem from two geometrically opposed approaches to pastoral power – Lutheran states started to criticise the active Christian pastoral model as early as the 17th century, deciding to, instead, leave secular matters to the state, which allowed their biopolitical programmes to reach unprecedented heights.³⁷ Therefore, Ojakangas criticises Foucault by stating that Christian pastoral power should not be regarded as the basis of modern biopolitics but as a hindrance to it.³⁸ Again, Ojakangas argues that this does not mean that Lutheranism (or any other form of Christianity) per se should be regarded as exceedingly biopolitical – in fact, the exact opposite is true as biopolitical advances continued to be criticised by the members of the Lutheran clergy.³⁹ Lutheranism simply diminished the anti-biopolitical religious pastoral elements and opened up wider, secular avenues for governing, which allowed for the return of the Greco-Roman approaches that were focused on optimising the population. These

²⁹ *History of Sexuality*, 1:19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 63.

³³ Backman, "Self-Care and Total Care," 280.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France 1983-1984* [2008] (2011), 247. See "Self-Care and Total Care," 280.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (1982), 782.

³⁶ Ojakangas, "Lutheranism and Nordic Bio-politics," 5–23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

biopolitical ideas had thrived during antiquity, met significant resistance during the rise of early Christianity and started to make a gradual return during the Renaissance.⁴⁰

Unlike Ojakangas, we do not focus on the religious factions' later role as enablers or inhibitors of modern biopolitical developments. Our Foucauldian reinterpretation of Luther and early Lutheranism focuses primarily on the time of the Reformation. Furthermore, we argue that although secular pastoral governing is of course exceedingly different from religious pastoral governing, they both remain manifestations of pastoral power, and as Foucault also argued, the Reformation intensified both.⁴¹ Therefore, our hypothesis is that the intensified temporal forms of pastoral power can be regarded as something pertaining to the genealogy of modern biopower.

Our approach to the topic is three-pronged. Firstly, we provide a few examples of Foucauldian sovereign power roughly from the era of the Reformation. We do so to establish the opposite of what we are looking for and to highlight the fact that biopower was by no means an omnipresent occurrence and that its diametrical opposite was still exceedingly commonplace. Secondly, we seek to offer a deeper understanding of the less-discussed split between disciplinary power and sovereign power by highlighting examples of discipline in Luther's era – some time before the classical period, or the time of the technology's rapid development according to Foucault's analyses.⁴² We claim that the reformed subjects' behaviour is moulded through various disciplinary institutions, including the church and the school. Thirdly and finally, we discuss the fact that Luther's theology allows him to make arguments on socio-political questions, which appear to include clear biopolitical undertones. We dedicate two chapters to discussing these biopolitical aspects, which are related to sex, marriage and reproduction as well as poor relief and taking care of social issues in a centralised manner.

THE SPECTACLE OF DEATH

Before describing the disciplinary and biopolitical undercurrents in Luther and early Lutheranism, we shine a light on the historical context by examining a few examples of the opposite of what we are looking for, namely the technology of power that Foucault calls sovereign power. This allegedly older technology of power is embodied by the authority of a commanding figure such as a king, a prince or even a pope and, more specifically, it is linked to their right to kill law-breaking subjects as a means of displaying their might.⁴³ Bearing in mind probably the most famous example of sovereign power, the graphic execution of the failed regicide Robert-François Damiens, as described vividly in the beginning of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*,⁴⁴ we highlight three additional instances that occurred shortly before and during the Reformation.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Security, Territory, Population*, 229–230.

⁴² *History of Sexuality*, 1:140. Note that a few years earlier Foucault maintained that disciplinary arrangements of power had already existed during the Middle Ages although sovereign power was still ubiquitous. Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973-1974* [2003] (2006), 79.

⁴³ *Security, Territory, Population*, 130.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 3–6.

The first of our three examples is the *auto da fé* (“act of faith”) rituals, which took place between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries and culminated in fully-fledged spectacles of death. *Autos da fé* were public punishments and executions of heretics and other heterodox individuals, which were acted out by secular authorities in cooperation with the Inquisition. These ceremonies, which “were held in a spacious city square”,⁴⁵ instilled fear in the subjects and revealed how powerful and closely intertwined the church and state were in mediaeval and early modern Spain, Portugal and the colonies. Marvin Lunenfeld goes as far as to claim that the connection between state authority and ecclesiastical power constituted a “pedagogy of fear”, which reminded dissenters of the consequences of their actions.⁴⁶

The need for such a pedagogy emerged when [the joint Catholic Monarchs] Fernando and Isabel undertook consolidation of their domains. All through the twisting historical path leading towards that moment Iberia had been unique in Europe for having Muslims, Christians, and Jews living in close proximity [...]. An internal religious conquest forced all non-Catholics to convert or be expelled. To dominate this rapidly changing situation the crown designed a subservient inquisitorial tribunal, which a compliant papacy let the monarchy control.⁴⁷

The second example is provided by the notorious sixteenth century philosopher, and Luther’s contemporary, Niccolò Machiavelli, who recommends the new prince to rely on spectacular death to showcase his power.⁴⁸ More specifically, in the seventh chapter of *The Prince*, the Florentine Secretary describes the brutal execution of Remirro de Orco by Cesare Borgia. Remirro, who was Borgia’s henchman, had been tasked with re-establishing the order and security in the region of Romagna whose rulers were ineffective and causes of disunity. Remirro’s solution was to spill blood, which helped increase Borgias “prestige”.⁴⁹ However, this display of cruelty had other, undesirable consequences. According to Machiavelli, Remirro became a problem for Borgia, whose subjects were upset by the use of such violence.⁵⁰ The Duke solved the issue by having his henchman killed, mangled and displayed publicly, consequently winning over the people’s favour through a wise display of sovereign power.

Having found the occasion to do so, one morning at Cesena he had Messer Remirro’s body laid out in two pieces on the piazza, with a block of wood and a bloody sword beside it. The ferocity of such a spectacle left that population satisfied and stupefied at the same time.⁵¹

⁴⁵ António José Saraiva, *The Marrano Factory. The Portuguese Inquisition and Its New Christians 1536–1765* [1969] (2001), 100.

⁴⁶ Marvin Lunenfeld, “Pedagogy of Fear: Making the Secret-Jew Visible at the Public *Autos de Fe* of the Spanish Royal Inquisition,” *Shofar. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 18:3 (2000), 77.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 78. Albeit briefly, Foucault mentions the burning of heretics as an instantiation of sovereign power in Michel Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France 1973-1974* [2013] (2015), 11.

⁴⁸ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* [1532] (2008), 26-27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 27; see Andrea Di Carlo, “Early Modern Masters of Suspicion” (2022), 106–108.

⁵⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

There are striking similarities between the *auto da fé* and Remirro's demise – even though the latter was not religiously motivated. On both occasions, the public spectacle of death underscores how mighty and authoritative those using sovereign power are. No wonder that Yves Winter claims that Machiavelli considers violence as “a political tactic” that has become “thinkable”.⁵² Victoria Johnston re-emphasises Winter's contention by claiming that “cruelty through spectacle is a tool that can be used by the ruler to varying degrees of success”.⁵³ Say that we took Machiavelli's rendition of the story for granted; in that case, Remirro's cruelty did not lead to a desirable outcome – at least from his own perspective – conversely, it appears that Borgia's use of violence was successful.

Our third and concluding example of sovereign power during the time of the Reformation has to do with the controversy of the anti-Trinitarian and anti-paedobaptist Spanish polymath Michael Servetus (also known as Miguel Servet), which led to his 1553 demise at the stake in Geneva. For context, Geneva had followed the French Reformist John Calvin's guidelines while forming its government, but the reformer himself had started to face increased opposition in the city.⁵⁴ This is when the controversial Servetus made his visit to Geneva, where he was soon captured and placed on trial. Calvin's secretary acted as the *de jure* accuser in the case, most likely because the local laws required that the accuser, too, was held captive for the duration of the legal process.⁵⁵ Calvin wanted Servetus dead but argued that it would be more humane to have him beheaded instead of burned.⁵⁶ His latter wish was not granted. Even so, the affair acted as “a turning point”⁵⁷ in the reformer's career, and “Soon Geneva was firmly in Calvin's control”.⁵⁸ In other words, Calvin's use of moral and religious authority in having a heretic executed helped him consolidate his authority – regardless of whether this was his intention.

These examples highlight the fact that the age of the Reformation and the years leading up to it were dotted with spectacular displays of sovereign power – again, understood here in the Foucauldian sense as a way of showcasing power through the negation of life. Furthermore, these and other similar examples of sovereign power and the associated spectacular death seem to appear in secular, religious and mixed contexts. However, we argue that this was not the only way that power was used during the Reformation. Indeed, power appears to have been manifested in ways that were not necessarily negative, hierarchical or deathly. As we highlight in the upcoming chapters, Lutheranism employed a more dispersed “form” of power that did not necessarily stem downwards from a single sovereign entity. Moreover, many of such interventions targeted peoples' everyday lives in maximising, optimising and even affirmative ways. Although they continued to be accompanied by religious arguments, many of them were linked to primarily secular problems. Next, we focus on a few ideas and

⁵² Yves Winter, *Machiavelli and the Orders of Violence* (2018), 2.

⁵³ Victoria Johnston, “Machiavelli's Conception of Religion and its Relevance to his Political Philosophy in *The Prince*,” *Ipsa Facto. The Carleton Journal of Interdisciplinary Humanities* 1 (2022), 54.

⁵⁴ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations, 2nd ed.* (2009), 243–247.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

practices related to disciplining the lives of individuals in Luther's writings and early Lutheranism.

LUTHERAN DISCIPLINE

In this chapter, we argue that the technology of power that Foucault calls discipline – or the anatomo-politics of the body – did not emerge during the seventeenth century, for the simple reason that it was already in operation in sixteenth-century Wittenberg, where Luther was acting as a minister. When describing disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault claims that it regularises and standardises behaviour.⁵⁹ He highlights the school as one of the sites of this “supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding”⁶⁰ power, which – we claim – is also visible in Luther. *Discipline and Punish* even includes a depiction of a school among the other appendaged pictures that provide visual examples of disciplinary power. The image in question is Hyppolite Lecomte's lithograph depicting a classroom and a teacher instructing his pupils how to spell,⁶¹ which was a standardised and necessary activity that helped ensure the well-being of the nascent liberal society.

There is something strikingly similar in the German painter Lucas Cranach's altarpiece in Wittenberg, although it predates Foucault's dating of disciplinary power. The altarpiece, which includes four painted panels laid out in the formation resembling the letter T within a cross-shaped frame, offers a great summary of Lutheran theology: the two biblically sanctioned sacraments (the Lord's Supper in the upper central panel and baptism on the left-hand side) play a major role. However, we would like to dwell on the only panel situated underneath the three others and directly below the Lord's Supper. Here, Luther is preaching the Gospel from his pulpit, with his congregation listening to him attentively, while Christ on the Cross appears between the pulpit and the faithful.

Surely, the painting accounts for Luther's Christocentric faith, but there is also more to it. As is the case with Lecomte's lithography included in *Discipline and Punish*, the austere church and congregation of the altarpiece showcase what a Lutheran service ought to look like: the Gospel is more important than the ceremony and Christ should be the sole focus of the congregants.⁶² Bonnie Noble contends that “local figures and quotidian rituals in the picture so obviously reciprocate the people and events within the church [...]”.⁶³ Imagine the congregation as the school in the lithograph. The minister acts as a normalising teacher and the congregants are his pupils. Now, combine this with the fact that the Reformation shapes the faithful in a novel manner – they no longer simply recite prayers passively in Latin; instead, they have now acquired at least some of the characteristics of a modern subject.

⁵⁹ *Discipline and Punish*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁶¹ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison* (1977), n.p., Illustration 10. Note, that at least some of the English editions omit a few of the illustrations – including this one.

⁶² Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (2004), 252.

⁶³ Bonnie Noble, “The Wittenberg Altarpiece and the Image of Identity,” *Reformation* 11:1 (2006), 87. Cf. Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image*, 125-139.

Further, as Foucault argues, people's everyday lives were now controlled at an unprecedented level.⁶⁴ Tilli reinforces this point by stating that "A comprehensive self-examination and control gained ground"⁶⁵ and that the Protestants initiated this change in a "hierarchically supple"⁶⁶ manner that still managed to control individual lives more profoundly than the Catholic approach, which remained focused on the importance of personal confessions. For the Protestants, preaching was now the key to spreading information, achieving faith and, therefore, salvation.⁶⁷ The fact that preaching is performed publicly (unlike the personal confession) emphasises the church's political nature:⁶⁸ "in the Lutheran adaptation of the theological and economic paradigm, governing takes place through preaching. Preachers are overseers, ensuring that society as a whole leads a godly life, and no sphere or person is beyond their grasp".⁶⁹ Tilli's argument mirrors Foucault's contention that disciplinary power needs visibility to work.

Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of *compulsory visibility*. In discipline, it is the subjects *who have to be seen*. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being *constantly seen*, of being *able always to be seen*, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection.⁷⁰

Previously, we used the school as an analogy for the Lutheran sermon, but early Lutheranism was also looking to apply similar changes to schools as such. Luther wrote a famous foreword to an agreement proposing the adoption of a "common chest", or the centralised use of funds, for the common good in the German town of Leisning. The ensuing agreement (which was not written by Luther himself) includes several interesting ideas regarding schools. Not only was the schoolmaster "required to train, teach, govern, and live"⁷¹ in a manner that upheld "the honorable and upright Christian training and instruction of the youth, a most essential function",⁷² but this office was to be placed under "constant and faithful supervision"⁷³ by higher-ranking authorities that would make necessary interventions on a weekly basis. It is interesting to note that not only are the children governed and moulded in a very specific manner, but the schoolmaster's actions and life itself were to be supervised as well. This implies the existence of multiple levels of surveillance.

Therefore, we argue that Lutheranism already included a disciplinary element, meaning that it employed the double mechanism of "submission and use [...]: there was a useful body and

⁶⁴ *Security, Territory, Population*, 229–230

⁶⁵ Tilli, "Preaching as Master's Discourse," 117.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 119–120.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, See Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory. For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* [2007] (2011), 144–149.

⁶⁹ "Preaching as Master's Discourse," 124.

⁷⁰ *Discipline and Punish*, 143. Our emphases.

⁷¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 45, The Christian in Society II* (1962), 188.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

an intelligible body".⁷⁴ In other words, it instigated an understanding of the body based upon usefulness and docility, where the more useful the body would be, the more docile it would have to be.⁷⁵ Discipline makes the use of power more dispersed and, by extension, more effective. These basic elements of disciplinary power are also underscored in Luther's written doctrines, for example, when he outlines the fathers' role in guiding the behaviour of his children in his *Large Catechism* (1529). Here, he asserts that

it is the duty of every father of a family to question and examine his children and servants at least once a week and to ascertain what they know of it [the Catechism], or are learning, and, if they do not know it, to keep them faithfully at it.⁷⁶

Luther goes on to demand that "the young learn the parts which belong to the Catechism or instruction for children well and fluently and diligently exercise themselves in them and keep them occupied with them".⁷⁷ Children and servants are docile bodies who are taught and made to recite prayers. Congregates, children and servants all adhere to this power system, which does not require codified power relationships as disciplinary power acts and can be dispersed in a broad variety of ways.

Even penitential institutions, the key topic of *Discipline and Punish*, are present in early Lutheranism, at least as an analogy for marriage. Steven E. Ozment offers an intriguing summary of a 1524 marriage service by Johann Bugenhagen, who also officiated Luther's wedding the following year. Here, matrimony is seen as "a penitential institution in which the wife freely accepts the pain of childbirth and subjection to her husband, and the husband the pain of daily labor and worry over his family's well-being".⁷⁸ In other words, one ought to be willing to auto-discipline oneself through the pains of married life. We discuss marriage further in the next section, which deals with biopolitical elements in Luther's thought.

LUTHER ON SEX, MARRIAGE AND REPRODUCTION: BIOPOLITICS BEFORE THE BIOPOLITICAL ERA

Luther did not shy away from tackling temporal socio-political issues, including but not limited to the detrimental prevalence of celibacy and begging. Although he was a theologian whose views on socio-political issues appear to stem primarily from his interpretation of the Scriptures,⁷⁹ he also employed other, secular, arguments to deal with worldly problems. In this and the ensuing chapter, we focus on these mundane lines of reasoning. That said, we have no intention of downplaying the primary, religious arguments, which acted as the foundation for his wider project.

⁷⁴ *Discipline and Punish*, 136.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther* [1529] (2018), 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Steven E. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled. Family Life in Reformation Europe* (1983), 8; see Johann Bugenhagen, *Wye man die / so zu der Ehe greyffen / Eynleitet zu Wittenberg* (1524); see also John McKeown, *God's Babies. Natalism and Bible Interpretation in Modern America* (2014), 86–87.

⁷⁹ Eike Wolgast, "Luther's Treatment of Political and Societal Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and L'ubomír Batka (2014), 397–413.

We focus on two particularly interesting cases: Luther's polemics against the unwarranted glorification of celibacy, which we examine in this current chapter, and his desire to amend poor relief, which we discuss in the next chapter. Many of Luther's most notable texts regarding these topics are compiled in two specific volumes of the English collection of his works, namely, volumes 44 and, in particular, 45, which have fitting subtitles: *The Christian in Society I* and *II*.⁸⁰ We use these two volumes, Luther's other texts related to the abovementioned topics and the prevailing secondary literature to analyse the biopolitical undercurrents of the Reformer's arguments.⁸¹

The first, at least partially biopolitical cluster in Luther's texts we would like to discuss has to do with marriage and procreation. These themes appear often in Luther, who argues that God created the sexes in a manner that forces them to multiply and stresses that this is not simply a command but rather a "divine ordinance".⁸² The fact that human beings have sexual organs, perform sexual acts and reproduce are innate and natural occurrences similar to other mundane bodily functions including eating, sleeping, urinating and defecating, which no earthly authority (including the pope) can control.⁸³ Moreover, trying to fight this ordinance is virtually impossible and results in the sexual urges seeping through other, sinful avenues.⁸⁴ Marriage is the only way to guard against these sins, and it ought to be championed as a means of preventing damnation.⁸⁵ Luther goes as far as to compare the state of marriage to a hospital where incurably sick (sinful) people are kept from becoming even sicker.⁸⁶ After getting married, the husband and wife are free to perform sexual acts as they please, or as Jane E. Strohl sums up Luther's position, although moderation remains important, there ought to be no rules that limit marital intercourse – including when and how it should be performed.⁸⁷

Many of Luther's arguments regarding sex are varying attacks against the Catholic church's policies, which – the reformer argues – glorified celibacy, placed allegedly devilish or demonic impediments on marriages and solicited dispensations for granting certain kinds of matrimonies, which it otherwise banned.⁸⁸ Let us tackle these issues individually, starting with celibacy. Luther argues that only a few special groups are truly exempted from the Biblical ordinance of being fruitful and multiplying. More specifically, one needs to be a eunuch

⁸⁰ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 44, The Christian in Society I* (1966) includes the pertinent work "A Sermon on the Estate of Marriage," 3–14; Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 45* includes: "The Persons Related by Consanguinity and Affinity who Are Forbidden to Marry According to the Scriptures," 7–9; "The Estate of Marriage," 17–50; "An Exhortation to the Knights of the Teutonic Order That They Lay Aside False Chastity and Assume True Chastity of Wedlock," 141–158; "Ordinance of the Common Chest, Preface," 169–178; and "That Parents Should Neither Compel nor Hinder the Marriage of Their Children and That Children Should Not Become Engaged Without Their Parents' Consent," 385–394.

⁸¹ The other highlighted texts include "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church", which appears in Martin Luther, *Luther's Works. American Edition, Vol. 36* (1959), 11–126 and "Open Letter to the Christian Nobility", which appears in Martin Luther, *Works of Martin Luther. The Philadelphia Edition, Vol. 2* (1915), 61–165.

⁸² *Luther's Works*, 45:18.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 18, 155; Luther, *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:122.

⁸⁴ *Luther's Works*, 45:18.

⁸⁵ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 44:9, 390–391.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁷ Jane E. Strohl "Luther on Marriage, Sexuality, and the Family," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel and L'ubomír Batka (2014), 370–382.

⁸⁸ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 36:97–98; *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:120.

in one of three senses of the word: 1) impotent or barren from birth, 2) made so by other human beings, or 3) called to celibacy by God while remaining otherwise fit for marriage.⁸⁹ This final category requires special grace and is exceedingly rare.⁹⁰ There is also a fourth, all too common way of practising celibacy – the one based on human vows, which the reformer considers foolish, against the divine ordinance, invalid, prone to hidden sin and something that ought to be annulled.⁹¹

Luther also attempts to dismantle a wide array of other unnecessary obstacles to marriages. He attacks the “vulvas and genitals-merchandise”⁹² ran by Rome, which, again, deemed certain matrimonyes illegal but nevertheless granted them in exchange for money. The reformer argues that such marriages should be made open to every Christian.⁹³ No human law can invalidate a wedlock, and only polygamy and the specific kinds of marriages between close relatives which are forbidden in the Scriptures ought to remain prohibited.⁹⁴ This means, for example, that “a blind and dumb person”⁹⁵ should be able to marry. Criminal activity should not be considered an impediment to marriage either; instead, lawbreakers ought to be punished in a way that does not lead to the additional sin that accompanies unmarried life.⁹⁶ A Christian should also be able to marry a pagan because “marriage is an outward, bodily thing, like any other worldly undertaking. Just as I may eat, drink, sleep, walk, ride with, buy from, speak to, and deal with a heathen, Jew, Turk, or heretic, so I may also marry and continue in wedlock with him”.⁹⁷ Furthermore, Luther argues that although a father should be able to have a say on whom his child is to marry, he cannot prevent them from marrying altogether.⁹⁸ Instead, a father is always obliged to provide for his children’s well-being, whether it comes to sustenance, sleep or reproduction.⁹⁹ In other words, reproduction is a matter of well-being that needs to be satisfied just like other human needs.

Luther goes on to highlight the corporeal nature of sex and reproduction even further. One of the reasons why getting married is so important is because “fornication destroys not only the soul but also body, property, honor, and family as well [...] it consumes the body, corrupts the flesh and blood, nature, and physical constitution”.¹⁰⁰ This implies once again that bodily wellbeing is at stake – and because Luther is suggesting an intervention to improve it – his stance is undoubtedly biopolitical. The reformer doubles down on the detrimental bodily effects of abstinence by stating that

⁸⁹ *Luther’s Works*, 45:18–21.

⁹⁰ *Luther’s Works*, 44:9.

⁹¹ *Luther’s Works*, 45:19–22, 155.

⁹² *Luther’s Works*, 36:98–99. Luther discusses the pope’s extensive list of forbidden marriages and his own, shorter list based on the Bible on many occasions, e.g., *Luther’s Works*, 45:7–9, 22–23; *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:128. His arguments here appear solely religious.

⁹³ *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:123.

⁹⁴ *Luther’s Works*, 36:98; *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:123; see McKeown, *God’s Babies*, 86.

⁹⁵ *Luther’s Works*, 45:30.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 391–392.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

Physicians are not amiss when they say: If this natural function is forcibly restrained it necessarily strikes into the flesh and blood and becomes a poison, whence the body becomes unhealthy, enervated, sweaty, and foul-smelling. That which should have issued in fruitfulness and propagation has to be absorbed within the body itself. Unless there is terrific hunger or immense labor or the supreme grace, the body cannot take it; it necessarily becomes unhealthy and sickly. Hence, we see how weak and sickly barren women are. Those who are fruitful, however, are healthier, cleaner, and happier.¹⁰¹

On a similar note, one should enter wedlock at a young age – not only because it is difficult to begin a new chaste life after first living in sin¹⁰² but also because men aged 20 years and women aged 15–18 years “are still in good health and best suited for marriage”.¹⁰³

The stakes get even higher when Luther argues that marriage is not only useful to the “body, property, honor and soul of an individual but also to the benefit of whole cities and countries, in that they remain exempt from plagues imposed by God”¹⁰⁴ – some of which he considers brand new. Walther I. Brandt, the editor and translator of the quoted text, “Estate of Marriage”, relates Luther’s statement to syphilis, which had started its documented spread in Europe during the reformer’s lifetime.¹⁰⁵ Advocating for early and chaste marriages appears as an obvious way of dealing with this unprecedented predicament.

Luther is not satisfied with merely describing the current state of marriages and reproduction but seeks to change how these issues are handled. Further, he argues that these are tasks for the civil government, which ought to intervene to a wide variety of sexual questions including frigidity¹⁰⁶ and prostitution.¹⁰⁷ Because marriage is a bodily thing, it makes sense that the matter of divorce is also handled by civil authorities.¹⁰⁸ This does not mean that divorces should be granted without a valid reason, such as one of the partners being unfit for marriage¹⁰⁹ – and even then, Luther offers a curious alternative to the divorce: a fit female partner could arrange a secret marriage with the unfit (impotent) male partner’s close relative so that she can have her “life and [...] the full use of her body”¹¹⁰ without becoming adulterous. On a similar note, committing adultery is another reason for terminating a marriage. The innocent partner is free to marry again,¹¹¹ but the guilty party ought to be killed by the temporal authorities – or if they are lenient and soft – at least be made to flee to a distant country.¹¹² That

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 45–46.

¹⁰² Ibid., 44.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 44n44.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 34.

¹⁰⁷ *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:160–162.

¹⁰⁸ *Luther’s Works*, 45:32, 45.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 29–30, 45.

¹¹⁰ *Luther’s Works*, 36:103–104, 45:18.

¹¹¹ *Luther’s Works*, 36:105, 45:30–31.

¹¹² *Luther’s Works*, 45:32–33. Luther’s depiction of the adulterer is curiously similar to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of the *homo sacer*: “whoever commits adultery has in fact himself already departed and is considered as one dead”. Ibid., 32; see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life* [1995] (1998), 7–8. However, Agamben’s adaptation is much closer to the Foucauldian notion of sovereign power than it is to biopolitics, which places the

is, unless the innocent partner wishes to continue the marriage, in which case the guilty party should still be punished publicly.¹¹³

It is plain to see that Luther wishes to remove all impediments to sexual intercourse and reproduction – if the acts are not prohibited by the Scriptures. This is part of the reason why John McKeown has argued that the theologian was a *social natalist* who lived in a time that followed a period of declining population.¹¹⁴ However, it is important to note that Luther was not a natalist in the sense of the word that later natalists would necessarily subscribe to – he “does not exclude the mundane reasons for desiring offspring, but these are not his focus”.¹¹⁵ Further, he was not necessarily interested in increasing the absolute population size rather than merely preserving it,¹¹⁶ which has not stopped later Protestant natalists from mining his texts for quotes.¹¹⁷ Despite all of this, it is important to note that although Luther believed in the eminent end of this world, he still exhibits

a worldly pragmatism desiring sufficient reproduction for the survival of humankind and the nation. Anyone born into the pre-modern situation of high premature mortality would, if concerned for society’s welfare, advocate high fecundity. Social natalists go a step further and claim that the necessity of preventing population decline should have priority over individual preferences. It would be fair to identify Luther as a social natalist of this type, though it did not much occupy his attention.¹¹⁸

Again, Luther’s general approach is primarily religious. Even his more secular arguments often stem from notions such as the divine ordinance and the prevention of sin. Nevertheless, he made the aforementioned practical arguments that seem to complete and strengthen his theological approach. Therefore, we would like to argue that the proposed socio-political interventions include a, perhaps secondary yet distinctly noticeable, biopolitical undercurrent of caring for the physical wellbeing of the population – regardless of whether the size of the said population was to be increased or simply maintained. The significance of this stance cannot be dismissed by arguing that this was not Luther’s *primary* concern. It appears to have occupied his attention enough for him to return to it repeatedly.

BIOPOLITICS OF POOR RELIEF AND THE COMMON CHEST

The second major set of biopolitical interventions in Luther’s thought that we wish to explore is connected to the revamping of poor relief and the centralised use of common funds as a means of solving various socio-political challenges. Luther’s desire to remodel poor relief

two thinkers in an “impossible dialogue”. See Mika Ojakangas, “Impossible Dialogue on Bio-power: Agamben and Foucault,” *Foucault Studies* 2 (2005), 6-7.

¹¹³ *Luther’s Works*, 45:32–33.

¹¹⁴ *God’s Babies*, 103.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 104–105; see also John McKeown, “Receptions of Israelite Nation-building: Modern Protestant Natalism and Martin Luther,” *Dialog* 49 (2010), 133–140.

¹¹⁷ *God’s Babies*, 77–78.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

seems to stem once again from his antipathy toward a certain Catholic custom, more specifically, begging, which he sees as a deceitful practice that “hurts the common people”¹¹⁹ and hence ought to be terminated in all its forms.¹²⁰ This ultimatum goes also for the mendicant houses, which should all be consolidated into a single well-provided institution that would allow for a better way of taking care of the needy.¹²¹ The physical spaces that mendicant houses and monasteries occupy should in turn be converted into schools and, if need be, homes.¹²²

Poverty and suffering had been considered ideals to strive for during the Middle Ages because they signalled one’s closeness to Christ.¹²³ A case in hand is Saint Francis of Assisi, the founder of the Franciscans and the son of a wealthy merchant, who renounced his father’s possessions in a bid to imitate Christ.¹²⁴ The Reformation reverses the discourse on poverty, as Foucault, too, notes in *Madness and Civilization*.¹²⁵ This reversal leads to poverty being regarded as something akin to sin.¹²⁶ Lutheranism is able to reject begging because of the doctrine of *sola fide*, which removes an eschatological need for “good deeds” as salvation is now attainable through faith alone. The Calvinist stance on poverty appears even more radical. The doctrine of double predestination emphasises the fact that only God knows who are predestined to eternal salvation, and material wealth acts as the signal of this election.¹²⁷ In sum, poverty represents a theological danger to both of these Reformist branches; therefore, it is not something that should be celebrated.¹²⁸ We argue that these seemingly aporophobic sentiments – and the general anxiety regarding one’s salvation – led to a fertile soil for biopolitical advancements, at least in Luther’s case.

If begging was to be terminated, the problem of poverty would require another solution. According to Luther, “Every city could support its own poor”¹²⁹ and make sure “who were really poor and who not”.¹³⁰ This implies that authorities ought to gather information regarding the needy. In fact, the reformer goes as far as to sketch out an idea that cities could have a special “overseer or warden who knew all the poor and informed the city council or the priests what they needed”.¹³¹ This is not to say that the idle poor should be made rich through hard-working people’s labour; instead, “It is enough if the poor are decently cared for, so that they do not die of hunger or of cold”.¹³² Working hard and escaping idleness remain the keys to achieving the necessities of life.¹³³ However, since some people are not able to work, there ought to be a “safety net” that ensures a decent life for everyone.

¹¹⁹ *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:135.

¹²⁰ *Luther’s Works*, 45:176; *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:134.

¹²¹ *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:115–116.

¹²² *Luther’s Works*, 45:175.

¹²³ Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Francis of Assisi* [1999] (2003), 44.

¹²⁴ Margaret R. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh. A History of Christian Thought* (2005), 50.

¹²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* [1961] (1989), 126.

¹²⁶ “Lutheranism and Nordic Bio-politics,” 11.

¹²⁷ This is the famous thesis espoused by Max Weber in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism and Other Writings* [1904] (2002), 68–70.

¹²⁸ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 127.

¹²⁹ *Works of Martin Luther*, 2:134.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 134–135.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 135.

¹³³ *Luther’s Works*, 45:48.

Again, Luther proposes that the needy should be provided with care from centralised public funds or, more specifically, a “common chest”.¹³⁴ He expresses his support for such a solution in several instances, including his previously discussed preface to the “Fraternal Agreement on the Common Chest of the Entire Assembly at Leisnig”.¹³⁵ The main text (which, again, was not written by Luther himself) provides a wealth of additional details on the topic. For example, those who are unable to work and are inflicted by poverty because of sickness or advanced age are to be sustained “so that their lives and health may be preserved from further deterioration, enfeeblement, and foreshortening through lack of shelter, clothing, nourishment, and care”.¹³⁶

The sick and the old are by no means the only ones who are to be provided with care. As mentioned earlier, the agreement also states that the teaching and governing of children as well as the supervision of these duties are also related to the common chest.¹³⁷ More specifically, impoverished orphans are “provided with training and physical necessities”.¹³⁸ Further, boys that show promise in intellectual skills are to be discovered and supported while the rest are prepared for manual work.¹³⁹ Meanwhile, orphaned girls receive help in the form of “a suitable dowry”¹⁴⁰ that allows them to marry. Therefore, the use of centralised funds is intertwined with the Lutheran goal of maximising the number of marriages, which we discussed in depth in the previous chapter. In addition to serving the individuals belonging to these specific groups, the common chest also offers benefits on the macrolevel as it helps secure “the general welfare of our parish”¹⁴¹ by allowing the storage of an ample amount of food “for bodily sustenance in times of imminent scarcity”.¹⁴² In other words, it helps secure the well-being of both the needy individuals and the larger population.

As we have pointed out, Luther appears as an enthusiastic champion for marriages and reproduction as well as an outspoken proponent for establishing secular governing that is aimed at achieving, among other things, public well-being.¹⁴³ Furthermore, these two questions are connected – effective poor relief helps attain more marriages. Hence, we stand in agreement with Ojakangas in that although Luther, Lutheranism and the associated notion of leaving the governing over worldly matters to secular authorities did not signal the beginning of biopolitical ideas and practices – as such ideas and practices were already in use in classical antiquity – Lutheranism still managed to offer a fertile ground for the return of these biopolitical elements and the birth of novel biopolitical advancements.¹⁴⁴ It is no surprise that

¹³⁴ Ibid., 172–173.

¹³⁵ For the preface see *ibid.*, 169–178; for the main text, see *ibid.*, 176–194.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 189. Foucault notes that “the Reformation, which left municipal administrations in charge of welfare and hospital establishments”, sped up the conversion of lazar houses (houses for lepers) into hospitals. *Madness and Civilization*, 6.

¹³⁷ *Luther's Works*, 45:188.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 190.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 191.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ See also Wolgast, “Luther’s Treatment of Political and Societal Life,” 397–413.

¹⁴⁴ “Lutheranism and Nordic Bio-politics,” 6, 21.

Lutheran countries would go on to develop the welfare state model¹⁴⁵ and become pioneers in population statistics.¹⁴⁶

Going further than Ojakangas, we assert that it is plain to see that Luther's thought and early Lutheranism also include aspects pertaining to the specific intersection of power and life that is known today as biopolitics. In other words, we would like to argue that Luther's political statements exhibit unmistakable biopolitical elements before the alleged biopolitical era.¹⁴⁷ This assertion provides further support to claims that Foucault's periodisation of the phenomenon at hand needs to be amended.¹⁴⁸ Although biopolitics did not yet saturate the entire political landscape during Luther's era, nor was the optimisation of life viewed as the primary objective of virtually all politics, Luther's socio-political arguments still managed to include significant biopolitical aspects.

A WAY FORWARD: BIOPOWER BEFORE BIOPOWER

Foucault famously claims that the emergence of the two strata of biopower, discipline and biopolitical regulation, coincides respectively with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁴⁹ However, as we have showcased in this article, one can clearly witness examples of both technologies of power in Luther's era. In other words, we assert that the operation of biopower commenced some time before Foucault presumed it did. As mentioned, the French philosopher approximates such a stance when he makes the promising statement that the era witnessed an unprecedented level of interventions into peoples' everyday lives on both religious and mundane levels.¹⁵⁰ We have chosen to argue that many of these interventions ought to be examined as examples of biopower for the simple reason that they seek to govern, mould and optimise human beings both individually and as parts of the larger population.

More specifically, the first of the two technologies of biopower, disciplinary or anatomo-political power, is asserted on the Lutheran congregates, who are now able to study the Bible in the vernacular and are instructed to approach the truth in a novel manner – within themselves, and, therefore, experience the rise of a new kind of subjectivity. Furthermore, the technology of discipline touches people's lives through various dispersed and less centralised power dynamics that manifest in places such as churches and schools as well as in art and even the institution of marriage. All these institutions subjugate Lutheran subjects to novel models of behaviour. Hence, we argue that early Lutheranism includes a discernible disciplinary aspect.

The second strata of biopower, biopolitical governing of the population, is also noticeable in Luther, whose views on marriage, reproduction, poor relief and the common chest appear to include distinctly biopolitical elements before the phenomenon's birth according to

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Peter Sköld, "The Birth of Population Statistics in Sweden," *The History of the Family* 9:1 (2004), 5–21.

¹⁴⁷ See Samuel Lindholm, *Jean Bodin and Biopolitics Before the Biopolitical Era* (2024), 122–127.

¹⁴⁸ See Ojakangas, *On the Greek Origins*, 4.

¹⁴⁹ *History of Sexuality*, 1:139

¹⁵⁰ *Security, Territory, Population*, 229–230.

Foucault's hastily established initial timeline – which we are by no means the first to criticise.¹⁵¹ As mentioned, in Luther's thought, sex and marriage are bodily issues that are tied to wellbeing and require political interventions. For example, marriages ought to be facilitated and the population kept at least at a stable level through social natalism. Further, the poor ought to be taken care of with centralised funds, which ensures that their wellbeing does not deteriorate. This appears to signal a burgeoning social policy program *avant la lettre*. Although we have no desire to assert that Luther's biopolitically charged suggestions represent the very core of the theologian's line of reasoning, they still offer additional evidence to the claim that the history of biopolitics is not tied solely to the modern *episteme* but, instead, dates back at least to early modernity. Conversely, even though making secular, political and natalist interventions into issues such as sex, marriages and reproduction was not Luther's primary focus, he, nevertheless, included such arguments. Therefore, we claim that his socio-political thought contained an unambiguous biopolitical aspect.

Hence it appears to us that Luther and early Lutheranism employed both strata of biopower, discipline and biopolitical regulation, in a noteworthy manner. Such findings beckon us to correct both the faulty periodisation of biopower as a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century occurrence and Foucault's promising, yet somewhat narrow reading of Luther's era as the impetus to amplified governing over people's everyday lives. Moreover, we argue that completing these inquiries – and understanding their shared connection – can open new avenues for research, which may in turn help broaden the understanding of the still relevant manifestations of power. In other words, continuing this path may help us grasp how these technologies of power operate today – and some of the key similarities and differences between their manifestations throughout the different historical eras.

Although this article offers an initial push to reading Luther as a biopolitical thinker – and consolidates many of the pertinent discussions regarding Foucault and Luther as a means of establishing such a reading – it can only scratch the surface. In other words, there is still plenty of work to be done. Our suggestions for future research include investigating the biopolitical elements in Lutheranism as a wider phenomenon, including, for example, Philip Melancthon's texts, and in the context of other Reformist churches, such as the Church of England. We would not be surprised if a close analysis of Calvinism would produce some similar results as well.

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¹⁵¹ Agamben is famous for speculating that the phenomenon's origin is absolutely ancient. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9. Ojakangas gathers heaps of evidence to support the claim that the origins of biopolitics lie in classical Greece. Ojakangas, *On the Greek Origins*, 1–4.

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