The Birth of the Concept of Biopolitics –
A Critical Notice of Lemke’s Biopolitics
Nicola Morar (bio) and Colin Koopman (bio)


The past four decades of political and social theory have been witness to an explosion of neologisms offered as part of efforts at restructing the conceptual domain of contemporary critical inquiry. Conceptual vocabulary that was practically unthinkable only a few decades ago is now practically obligatory for anyone hoping to understand the contemporary landscapes of political and social theory. Twenty-five years ago someone who was deaf to the diverging resonances of terms such as “neoliberalism”, “postcoloniality”, or even “gender” could have been regarded as merely uninformed. Today, anyone proposing to work in political or social theory who cannot demonstrate adeptness with these terms is likely to be forthrightly dismissed as uninformed.

The introduction of significant new conceptual material raises the question, for each new generation, of what terms we take to be practically obligatory for traveling through the landscapes of contemporary critique. The facility to debate the meaning and ramifications of conflicting conceptions of “gender” is almost undeniably obligatory in this sense. But what about concepts that once had a power which they no longer seem to have? Must everyone be fluent in debates over “alienation” or “industrialism”? And what about conceptual constellations which are newly emergent? How should we specify their status as among the lingua franca (or not) of contemporary political and social theory?

The most central explicit thesis of Thomas Lemke’s Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction is that the concept of “biopolitics” (and presumably also that of “biopower”) has over the past few decades gained a theoretical stability and coherence that make it worthy as an object of critical concern. The book also forwards, albeit largely implicitly, another key thesis to the effect that this concept is a crucial object of contemporary critical inquiry, and indeed so crucial that perhaps we might now treat it as obligatory.

In this brief critical notice we shall: §I summarize Lemke’s attempt to “provide a systematic overview of the history of the notion of biopolitics and explore its relevance in contemporary theoretical debates” (xi), §II interrogate the main argument that Lemke himself advances about the concept of biopolitics, and §III assess Lemke’s delineation of current debates over this concept with an eye toward a methodological question, raised by Lemke himself, of how we might set about studying biopolitics today.

§I

After briefly discussing naturalistic-biologistic (Chapter 1) and politicist (Chapter 2) conceptions of biopolitics (further discussed below in §II), Lemke turns to an extensive discussion of the philosopher he proposes as the founding thinker of contemporary work on biopolitics, namely Michel Foucault (Chapter 3). For Lemke, Foucault departs from the dichotomy of life and politics since he neither traces the political back to biological determinants nor renders life the very object of political action. In contrast, Foucault provides us with a thorough analysis of the specific historical processes that made possible the emergence of both life as a political question and the accretion of life around the heart of the political.

After proposing Foucault as the founding thinker of biopolitics, Lemke details a wide range of contemporary contributions to its subsequent conceptualization. His presentation in these central chapters can be divided into two parts, though Lemke himself does not offer the implicit taxonomy we detect (a point to which we will return again in §III). The central contrast in these chapters is, in our terms, that between the ontologizers and the empiricist inquirers into biopolitics on the other. Lemke offers helpful overviews of the contributions of Giorgio Agamben (Chapter 4) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Chapter 5), showing in each case how a more ontological approach to biopolitics yields transformations of Foucault’s project that bring into clear focus the essentiality of biopolitics for our times at the same time that they risk a dedifferentiation of biopolitics vis-à-vis other modes of governance that appear in the history of Western politics. Agamben is the clearest example, for his work not only blurs the differences between “the emergence of human rights and the development of concentration camps,” but it also evinces a discernible “lack of concretization” and an “excessive dramatization” (55–6). Having discussed the ontologizers, Lemke then turns to empirical inquiries into biopolitics. Lemke here considers a range of theorists, from Anthony Giddens to Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, all of whom show how biopolitical questions have transformed the very terrain of contemporary politics (Chapter 6). He also describes the work of a set of empirically-minded science studies scholars, most notably Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, who have leveraged Foucault’s methods for the consideration of the ongoing stakes of emerging biopolitical forms of power, knowledge, and subjectivity in such contexts as genetics, synthetic biology, and psychiatry (Chapter 7). After these discussions of the ontologizers and the empirical inquirers, a further chapter discusses “a neglected
area of biopolitics” (7) including the work of a range of economists such as the German ordoliberals and the human capital theory of the Chicago school (Chapter 8). The discussion in this chapter appears to us somewhat out of place, though it is clearly motivated by Foucault’s own discussion of many of the same figures in his 1979 Birth of Biopolitics lectures at the Collège de France. In the book’s final chapter Lemke forwards some of his own positive proposals for the prospects of biopolitics studies today.

As the foregoing summary indicates, the book is impressive in its coverage of an enormous range of material. Lemke’s report on the current state of the literature is informed, interesting, and insightful. The wide range of the discussion raises the question of the completeness of this advanced introduction. Are there prominent exceptions in the contemporary literature on biopolitics that Lemke does not cover? Are there thinkers that one teaching an advanced seminar on biopolitics might feel obliged to include on a syllabus but who are not discussed in this book? We note at least one thinker conspicuously absent from Lemke’s discussions.

The prominent, some might even say glaring, exception in Lemke’s account is philosopher and historian Ian Hacking, whose studies of various aspects of biopolitics in The Taming of Chance (1990) and elsewhere merit discussion both for their uniqueness of insight and for their influence in philosophical circles largely neglected in Lemke’s study (namely, philosophy and sociology of science). One aspect of biopolitics neatly captured in Hacking’s work is its emphasis on counting, enumeration, and statistics—see for example The Emergence of Probability (1975), whose topics were explicitly connected to Foucaultian themes in detail in “Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers” (1982) and “How should we do the history of statistics?” (1991), the latter published in the widely-read Foucault Effect volume. Lemke briefly discusses the numerical notion of a population in his chapter on Foucault (cf. 36) but offers no sustained attention to the idea. Hacking’s work offers a corrective to the contemporary neglect of the role of sciences of numbers in the biopolitics of our times. For this and other reasons, his work merits careful attention in the context of studying historical and contemporary iterations of biopower.

§II

Lemke not only summarizes the landscape of contemporary biopolitical theory, but also assesses the coherence of the concept at the center of this growing body of theory. It is in this spirit that he offers in the book’s first two chapters a clear schema for a tripartite classification of the terrain on which life and politics meet in biopolitics. He begins as follows: “my point of departure is the virtual polarization that is attached to the merger of life and politics entailed in biopolitics” (3). This is shown to yield three potential conceptualizations, already alluded to above: naturalism, politicism, and interactionism.

The first conceptualization is that of the “naturalists” who consider life as basis of politics. Lemke’s goal is not just to provide us a list of thinkers that in the early part of the 20th century adopted a series of organicist concepts of the state (Kjellen, Selety, Uexküll, Hertwig, Roberts, and so on), but to unravel the basic assumption of those naturalist-biologists. The state is not “a legal construction whose unity and coherence is the result of individuals’ acts of free will,” but rather the state is an “original form of life” (10). As such, the state as a living whole is the very condition for individual and collective activities. The political has to be understood in reference to life, and as a consequence, biology becomes the only legitimate description for (political) reality.

In this context, two majors shifts occur in the way society and the state are conceived. First, society becomes a “self-enclosed community with a common genetic heritage” (11), and, second, social and political problems become the function of biological causes. Hence, the National Socialist biopolitical machine was grounded on this tension between life as a biological power and the very conviction that social problems are manageable through active control. The core assumption of this biopolitical model is that biology is, with its concepts and methods, the best tool to investigate and to explain the causes of political behavior.

On this view, biology becomes the proper explanatory paradigm for political behavior. Lemke claims that this kind of explanation persists even after the World War II in the form of a critique of social sciences that were supposed to integrate “ethological, genetic, physiological, psychopharmacological, and sociobiological hypotheses, models and findings” (15). Three core ideas function as a common thread. The first is that the very object of inquiry, which is political behavior, is “caused in substantial way by objectively demonstrable biological factors” (17), while cultural factors have only a minor input. Second, the goal of this explanation is not to provide a normative stance, but to build “a politics consistent with biological exigencies” (17). Last, this model aims for neutral observation, such that the descriptions that it yields are not agent-specific. Those are the key elements of the naturalist model which takes life as the basis of politics and that ultimately explains existing hierarchies “not as a social phenomenon but rather as an inevitable result of evolutionary history” (18).

A second family of conceptualizations of biopolitics, directly counterposed to naturalism, is offered by the “politicians” for whom life is the object and not the basis of politics. Those advancing this view endorse as a central premise that biological factors fail to explain the very fact that human beings are “a product of biocultural processes of development” (20). They maintain the very dualism of human nature and society, but they inscribe this dichotomy within a broader ecological framework. Consequently, this new form of biopolitics is not so much “focused on the biological foundations of politics but rather discloses life processes as a new object for political reflection and action” (23). Since politics faces a global environmental crisis, the very aim of biopolitics becomes the survival of the human species, the diversity of life on our planet, sustainability amidst industrial development, and so on.

This ecological model, which understands “man as a biospiritual unity whose life is set within the cosmic
Having surveyed these naturalist and politicist contributions in chapters 1 and 2, Lemke turns critical, and uses Foucault to map out a third conceptualization of the biopolitical. He argues that the dichotomy between the natural and the political, which both “naturalist and politicist approaches must presuppose” (31), is far from being an obligatory distinction.

The difficulty is not to think of life and politics separately, but to think of them as being in constant interaction. We thus call those endorsing this view the “interactionists”. For this group, Lemke argues with Foucault, one should not “trace political processes and structures back to biological determinants” but rather emphasize “the historical processes by which ‘life’ emerges as the center of political strategies” (33) and how these historically situated political practices shape our own understanding of life. Biopolitics is not merely an extension of politics, but a “fundamental transformation” since, as Foucault famously writes, “modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (Foucault, 1978, 143; Lemke, 34).

Foucault’s notion of biopolitics is multi-faceted. First, biopolitics defines a new form of power (biopower), and, as such, represents “a historical rupture in political thinking and practice” (34) from sovereign politics. Second, “modern racism” is a central mechanism of biopolitics. Third, biopolitics is “a distinctive art of governance” through an anatomy-politics of the human body and the species-body through a biopolitics of population. Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics renders visible the reasons why organic and political life cannot be thought separately, but only as the coproduction of an interaction. Thus, for Lemke, any form of “naturalization” of politics or of “ politicization” of life fails to capture the critical moment of co-determination between life and politics. Lemke successfully deploys this tripartite conceptual framework (naturalist, politicist, interactionists) to map out the theoretical literature on biopolitics. On this basis, the book ably achieves its goal of showing how various thinkers (Agamben, Hardt & Negri, Heller & Fehér, Giddens, Fassin, Rabinow and Rose) have come to occupy the available spaces within this biopolitical taxonomy.

Lemke’s book wagers that biopolitics is a fecund and coherent field of study across a range of disciplines, from political theory and philosophy to anthropology and sociology, to life sciences and ecology. Inquirers in all of these disciplines might, and perhaps even should, find themselves confronting questions concerning the transformations of contemporary practices at the intersection between the biological and the political. Where these questions do arise, Lemke’s book provides an excellent introduction for the uninitiated to the range of theoretical options that are currently available. That there are today a multiplicity of coherent paths for addressing these questions is due in large part to the work of Michel Foucault, at least if Lemke’s account is correct in locating Foucault as a kind of founding thinker of biopolitics. Lemke thus helps establish (at least one reason) why Foucault remains important for us today. Foucault is important as the political and the biological increasingly coalesce all around us in myriad and bizarre new forms, ranging from stem cell laboratories to digital dossiers to online see-your-genome applications to the quasi-industrial manufacture of parts and chassis for the synthesis of brand-new kinds of organisms that our world will soon host for the first time ever. This coalescence (and the congeries of technologies, sciences, powers, and subjectivities produced therein) will surely be one of the central challenges that the work of thought will face in the twenty-first century. The concept of biopolitics brings this knotted problematization into focus so that we can better begin to understand what we are doing to ourselves in politicizing life and biologizing politics.

But how did Foucault and others help bring our biopolitical problematizations into view? In Foucault’s case, the concept of biopower was the result of rigorous inquiries. Nobody would deny this, Lemke included. It is the basis for our distinction above between Lemke’s ontologizers and Lemke’s empiricists. We find the latter closer to Foucault, whose studies of biopolitics were more on the order of historical inquiries than ontological speculations. We thus hold that Lemke’s classifications could be further elucidated by way of a metaphilosophical distinction that we find crucial in these arenas, namely one between concepts (e.g., biopolitics) and methods or analytics (e.g., genealogy)—this is elaborated in further detail elsewhere (see Koopman and Matza, forthcoming 2013) but a quick characterization here will suffice. Foucault the philosopher, in good Deleuzian fashion, produced concepts like biopolitics, but it is crucial to observe that his process of production involved rigorous procedures of inquiry. He most usually referred to his procedures as “genealogy” and “archaeology”. A failure to distinguish process and product facilitates eliding a distinction between different ways in which the same concept can be inflected through different procedures. One can offer a genealogy of some hitherto unnoticed aspect of biopolitics. But one can also, as others have done, develop transcendentalist accounts of the ahistorical status of biopolitics. A distinction between philosophical concepts and philosophical methods would have enabled Lemke to better parse some of the differences he highlights but does not fully illuminate, such as the gap between the ontological ahistoricism of Agamben and Esposito on the one hand and the empirical approach of Rabinow and Hacking on the other. That difference is, we think, key, at least insofar as biopolitics as a field of study remains in quick motion. Its motion, in fact is
The most provocative gamble of Lemke’s book is his claim that biopolitics now stands as a coherent field of study in its own right. It is to Lemke’s credit that he shows why this provocation is now worth taking seriously. But if the concept of biopolitics is to do work in changing contexts of inquiry, then we need methods that will enable us to mobilize this concept as inquiry continues to track the emergence of that which can scarcely be anticipated by what has come before. Foucault’s importance, we think, is that he offered both concepts (biopolitics, discipline) and methods capable of mobilizing concepts through inquiry (archaeology, genealogy). Without methods for mobilization, concepts like biopolitics can only be universalized and thereby flattened to such a degree that they will fail to explain anything just as insofar as they pretend to explain everything. This, as Lemke suggests, is just where Agamben goes wrong (cf. 62). What we would add to Lemke, then, is a vocabulary for more fully unpacking that critique of the ontologizers. Lemke ably distinguishes three conceptual approaches to biopower (naturalistic, politicist, and interactionist), but his work does not quite make explicit a further distinction between two modes of inquiry whereby we might carry forward the specifically interactionist concept of biopolitics he favors.

This suggestion is tendered in the spirit of Lemke’s book itself, insofar as he ends with an explicit call for a new “analytics of biopolitics” along the lines of what we have been discussing (118ff.). Lemke points out that the interactionist view does not focus on the causes or effects of the politics of life. Rather, it shifts the attention to modes of functioning, and conceives the relation between life and politics as dynamic relationship. As such, “an analytics of biopolitics should investigate the network of relations among power processes, knowledge practices, and modes of subjectivation” (119). And, through a process of generating problems, which calls into question “the apparently natural and self-evident modes of practice and thought” (123), the analytics of biopolitics fulfills its critical function, and invites us to think differently about our present and future.

While Lemke closes with a discussion (albeit brief) of some of the crucial methodological issues we have raised in this section, our point is only that this discussion should have been more extensive, and also come earlier in the book. Were that the case then Lemke could have leveraged these points to distinguish contemporary theorists of biopower not only with respect to their differing concepts of biopower but also with respect to their diverging methods of inquiry into biopower.

What Lemke’s final chapter makes plain, and what can thus be read back into the book on the whole (albeit with some work and charity on the part of the reader), is that biopolitics is a coherent field of inquiry for future work in anthropology, sociology, science studies, and of course history and philosophy, and that it is such precisely because it is a field of inquiry, namely an arena for rigorous investigation and severe thought. What makes inquiry rigorous and severe is the constraint offered by methods or analytics. Therein lies the future of coming to terms with the normative ramifications of emerging biopolitical assemblages. This is a crucial task.

Lemke is to be applauded for showing both its coherence and its needfulness.

References


