

Foucault's Texts on Bio-politics – A Note

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I

From the closing pages of *Discipline and Punish* (1975, where he formulates the idea of normalisation) and emphatically from the last chapter of the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, (1976) we are led by Michel Foucault towards a vision of rule and existence, which will not be henceforth ever properly described as a vision of physicality of existence and rule, or materiality of rule, or even by that strange phrase, “biologised mode of life, existence, and politics”, but by “bio-politics”, which connects many threads of thinking, innovative ideas, as well as unanswered and to some extent unanswerable formulations. It will be an exaggeration to say that the last ten years of his life were engaged in working out a theory of bio-power and bio-politics. As we read the various formulations in several published volumes of his lectures in College de France, these appear like experimental forays in understanding the materiality of our existence and politics, while he was engaged in the same period in formulating quite other things, such as a new way of looking into the question of ethics, and possibilities of leading life in a new way. These two strands are and were related. Though Foucault never succeeded in effectively combining the two, yet there are links between the two, and precisely because of the links his ideas on bio-politics kept on evolving – as if these texts reflect the materialist other of a thinker engaged till the last days in analysing discourses. This is my opening observation, namely that we have to recognise the contingent nature of the theory of bio-politics to the extent we can call it a theory. My following remarks follow from this.

If the idea of a gradual evaporation of sovereignty in the context of the rise of a disciplinary society primarily working through normalisation techniques, and the emergence of an all-enveloping governmental art controlling human bodies and mind resulting in myriad centres of power - as myriad as are the bodies - is at the heart of the theory of bio-politics, then two things must strike us. Unfortunately these two things have not got the attention of most Foucault readers, but to me they are pertinent questions to be asked today.

- First, why and how did he think that sovereignty was only a legal phenomenon extolled in political science circles, and that therefore all it required was to cut it out from theoretical-political concerns, and arrive in stead at a grand theory of government? If critiquing liberal society was his aim, then why did he ignore the obvious coercive aspects of the so-called liberal society, and concentrate on so-called “non-coercive aspects” of power?

- Second, what is the relation in which his ideas stand when we recall the nineteenth century critical and revolutionary ideas on corporeal life, existence, and life cycle? As we all know, he always said that he was not writing a history of society, but how certain thinking, ideas, and thoughts emerged. Archaeology was the field and genealogy was the mode. He had said in response to a query in Berkeley's History Department in 1983, "I never stopped doing genealogy. Genealogy defines the target and aim of the work. Archaeology indicates the field in order to do genealogy." (<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpfoucault4.htm>). We should therefore turn the light on the master and see the genealogy of his ideas.

II

So, first, we shall have to spend few lines about his views on sovereignty. In a way his argument was that bio-politics emerged at a specific juncture of rule (to be sure, he was speaking of western societies only), when as he put it several times, "life itself" became the object of rule, thus necessitating "government of life", and making sovereign form of power, by which he meant "centralised form of juridical power" redundant. Clearly he was possessed with the idea of "break" or "discontinuity" at the end of what he called the "classical age" and the beginning of the "modern age". Also his aim was to distinguish between limited government under sovereign rule and unlimited government under bio-political rule. He was unable to see the thinness of line separating the two forms of rule, and the factors that made the former an in-built basis of the latter. Thus he could not factor in the point, namely, that even the most liberal of the rules would require colonial annexations, and colonial ways of rule would become part of governmentalising the society at "home". Elsewhere I have termed this as "colonial constitutionalism". Others have shown through meticulous researches how colonial state acted as a fundamental factor in the rise of liberalism. This of course brings us to the question: Was not colonial rule "bio-political rule"? I shall say yes - however, in a particular way. We do not have time here to discuss this point. The only thing I can say at this stage is that the critique by Giorgio Agamben holds true (even though there are some pitfalls in the manner he abstracts the question), namely that the sovereign power over bare life and death continues still today from what he called the early Roman days. In short, while Michel Foucault's insights are valuable for deciphering how governments today judge the question of life and welfare, we need not bother too much over his thesis of vanishing sovereignty. Capillary forms of power are everywhere buttressed by sovereign power, and that is one way of exercise of coercive power. Consider Iraq war of our time, or the entire colonial period in the past, or today's annexation of resources in countries such as India by force, you can see the interdependence of law, regulations, and force. It does not of course mean that forms of power do not mutate. To use the words of Althusser, like the map of Africa before the age of explorations, this theory is like a continent barely sketched.

If we read Foucault's texts like *Society Must be Defended* (lectures of 1975-76), *Security, Population, Territory* (lectures of 1978), or the *Birth of Bio-politics* (lectures of 1979), and compare with the two texts mentioned at the outset, we can notice two things – one, for some time at least he was trying to see history in the frame of race war, he was also trying to conceptualise a new kind of material shell in which society moves and mutates, and he wanted to explain this in terms of *power*, and not political economy, not politics, not even anthropology, but *power* emanating from the existence of the body/bodies. Therefore we must regard this theory constitutive of his entire outlook, *precisely in the domain of the theory of body or more accurately a theory of physicality*. There is therefore a paradox. In studying the emergence of the bourgeois society he sees existing society as a historical result, “inseparable from its genesis, to the point where it is necessary to conceive it as 'the result of its becoming'”. Yet as we know he is concerned with articulating different elements of this new form of power, which he terms as bio-power. There he ignores the significance of movement, of time, in which all social relations exist and interface. Because he is primarily concerned with *production*, he remains caught in explaining the circulation of power. The neglect of the sites of production costs his theory heavily.

It would be hard to find another thesis in Foucauldian theory, which questions anything more than the traditional identification of violence and politics. We have to first re-read his lectures on *Society Must be Defended* or some of his arguments in *Discipline and Punish* where he refers to a war-politics continuum inverting the continuum of politics-war. This is true to such an extent that the possibility of a non-violent politics appears chimerical in these works. Yet precisely because this continuum of war and politics is not founded in any theory of political power (which is different from governmental reason), when he later switches to the idea of non-coercive forms of power (for instance psychiatric power), the earlier formulations look like truisms, which he perhaps thought better to leave behind, precisely because these were too incendiary a material for the theorist of “government of the self”. The conceptual distinction between power and violence loses focus. Even if it is true that not all violent phenomena are political phenomena, we tend to feel quite certain as more the theory of bio-power and bio-politics unfolds that there could be politics without violence. Did not Marx warn us sufficiently that violence belongs to the core of the political? On the other hand this theoretical closure also closes the question, namely what happens to the subject under bio-political conditions? If we say that bio-politics is the “human condition”, in the way Hannah Arendt formulated the issue, then we have to follow her lead and say that this includes interruption, and we can say that is how subjectivity is constituted. But this is a metaphysical route, which Foucault rightly ignored. In fact he had said, that one “had to dispense with the constituent subject to get rid of the subject itself”... in order to arrive at an “analysis of the constitution of a subject within a historical framework”. But this historical

framework remained for him a framework of discourses within which the subjective constitution took place. Therefore he ignored the violent and coercive basis on which the idea of bio-politics was first aired in political language in 1911, when quarantining the mad, leper, thief, political adventurer, was mooted as a necessary bio-political step of the government! Thus we can see all kinds of phenomena now being clubbed as bio-power and bio-politics – suicide, terrorism, development of life sciences, bio-ethics, welfare measures including public health measures, bio-technology, genocide, racism, etc. The concept loses its potency, and this was one reason why Derrida in *Beast and the Sovereign* had critiqued the notion of bio-politics. He had wondered, could there could be any other form of politics at all than what is termed as “bio-politics”?

Yet, there is another way in which we can appreciate the evolution of the idea in Foucault and rescue it from banality. His *Birth of Bio-politics* is instructive in this respect. The reason is that in these lectures Foucault connects government as a form political rationality with the phenomenon called economy; and in analysing German post-war liberalism and liberalism of the Chicago School, he not only gives us a sketch of neo-liberal governmentality, but also enriches immensely the concept of government by scribing in it the concept of bio-politics. Till his 1978 lectures he had showed how the problem of government was discussed not only in political tracts, but also in philosophical, religious, medical and pedagogic texts. In addition he had shown how “government” also signified problems of self-control, guidance for the family and for children, management of the household, directing the soul, etc. For this reason, he defined “government” as conduct, or, more precisely, as “the conduct of conduct”, and thus as a term, which ranges from governing the self to governing others. In short, he was trying to show how the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determined each other’s emergence. Yet in all these explorations, economy was markedly absent.

But he makes up for the earlier deficit in a noticeable way, by pointing out several things in *Birth of Bio-politics*. First, he says, neo-liberalism makes the problem of the society the problem of economy. So if there was Nazism in Germany, the reason was not capitalism but lack of capitalism in the sense of lack of competition and the market. Neo-liberal governmentality would make market the lynchpin of construction of the state, and inequality of the society would be the equality of all. Market as the fundamental economic mechanism could function only under a series of conditions, which had to be guaranteed by legal measures. Pure competition therefore neither existed naturally nor could be completely attained, but provided the justified goal for incessant and active politics. Such politics would constantly balance a limited domain of liberty and a legitimate domain of government intervention. There was no naturalism in this economic-institutional unity, called the government. Monopolization was not destiny of economy, but the failure of government.

The other implication of this new idea of government is a new emphasis on law, because only with a proper form of law and appropriate juridical institutions necessary for social interventions the entrepreneurial form of activity can become the very heart of society. Law no longer belongs to super structure, but becomes an essential part of the economic-institutional base and an indispensable instrument for creating entrepreneurial forms within society. The social becomes a form of the economic. Managing social domains becomes a matter of vital policy. We can now see the new way in which Foucault now re-orient his arguments on rationality, life, and life-management. Human action becomes a form of economic rationality. “Self-determination” becomes a key economic resource and a factor in production, which means that from the entrepreneurial perspective it is ever less important to constrain individual liberty, as labour itself is a crucial element along the path to self fulfillment. Techniques such as flexible working hours, self-determined work teams, performance incentives, etc. not only transform the organization of production they re-orient the very relation between individuals and their labour. In short, neo-liberalism is a political rationality that tries to render the social domain economic, and link reduction in welfare services to the increasing call for personal responsibility, attainment, and self-care. Neo-liberalism is a technique of power that links the macro-political aims with micro-management of life. We can see how far Foucault had traversed from the original notion of a disciplinary society and the theory of “docile bodies” with his notion of bio-politics. We can say bio-politics comes to its own with the rise of neo-liberal governmentality.

III

We can then ask, in what way does it enhance our understanding of the materiality of power in the light of what we had earlier learnt and still learn from Marx? Here I shall be even quicker. Let us concentrate on one text only – Volume one of Marx’s *Capital*. In Chapter 25, titled as “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”, Section One, Marx says, “The law of capitalist production, that is at the bottom of the pretended “natural law of population,” reduces itself simply to this: The correlation between accumulation of capital and rate of wages is nothing else than the correlation between the unpaid labour transformed into capital, and the additional paid labour necessary for the setting in motion of this additional capital. It is therefore in no way a relation between two magnitudes, independent one of the other: on the one hand, the magnitude of the capital; on the other, the number of the labouring population; it is rather, at bottom, only the relation between the unpaid and the paid labour of the same labouring population. If the quantity of unpaid labour supplied by the working class, and accumulated by the capitalist class, increases so rapidly that its conversion into capital requires an extraordinary addition of paid labour, then wages rise, and, all other circumstances remaining equal, the unpaid labour diminishes in proportion. But as soon as this diminution touches the point at which the surplus labour that nourishes capital is no longer supplied in normal quantity, a

reaction sets in: a smaller part of revenue is capitalised, accumulation lags, and the movement of rise in wages receives a check... It cannot be otherwise in a mode of production in which the labourer exists to satisfy the needs of self-expansion of existing values, instead of, on the contrary, material wealth existing to satisfy the needs of development on the part of the labourer. As, in religion, man is governed by the products of his own brain, so in capitalistic production, he is governed by the products of his own hand.”

We can see how Marx foresees the capitalist task of population management. In Sections 3-4 he discusses the phenomenon of relative surplus population and its different forms. In Section 5 he discusses the nomad population, whom he describes as “a class of people whose origin is agricultural, but whose occupation is in great part industrial. They are the light infantry of capital, thrown by it, according to its needs, now to this point, now to that. When they are not on the march, they ‘camp’. Nomad labour is used for various operations of building and draining, brick-making, lime-burning, railway-making, &c. A flying column of pestilence, it carries into the places in whose neighbourhood it pitches its camp, small-pox, typhus, cholera, scarlet fever, &c. In undertakings that involve much capital outlay, such as railways, &c., the contractor himself generally provides his army with wooden huts and the like, thus improvising villages without any sanitary provisions, outside the control of the local boards, very profitable to the contractor, who exploits the labourers in two-fold fashion — as soldiers of industry and as tenants.” Marx then proceeds with an analysis of the Irish population situation, and then discussing the condition of agricultural labourer, he cites a statement immensely significant in our context, “The mere sense that they exist subject to this species... on the part of the landlords and their agents, has ... given birth in the minds of the labourers to corresponding sentiments of antagonism and dissatisfaction towards those by whom they are thus led to regard themselves as being treated as ... a proscribed race.”

Possibly greatest significance for our discussion is Part 8, Chapter 26, famously titled as “The Secret of Primitive Accumulation.” He says the secret is like “the original sin in theology”. And then, “In the history of primitive accumulation, all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capital class in course of formation; but, above all, those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled as free and “unattached” proletarians on the labour-market. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process. The history of this expropriation, in different countries, assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods.” Marx notes various phases and forms of primitive accumulation. In Chapter 28 he refers to “bloody legislations”. He discusses taxing and budgetary techniques, and the creation of the “home market” through coercive means for the industrial capital. This is then the secret – the secret

behind the emergence of liberty, the free individual, namely, we are again quoting Marx, “From that moment new forces and new passions spring up in the bosom of society; but the old social organization fetters them and keeps them down. It must be annihilated; it is annihilated. Its annihilation, the transformation of the individualized and scattered means of production into socially concentrated ones, of the pigmy property of the many into the huge property of the few, the expropriation of the great mass of the people from the soil, from the means of subsistence, and from the means of labour, this fearful and painful expropriation of the mass of the people forms the prelude to the history of capital. It comprises a series of forcible methods, of which we have passed in review only those that have been epoch-making as methods of the primitive accumulation of capital. The expropriation of the immediate producers was accomplished with merciless Vandalism, and under the stimulus of passions the most infamous, the most sordid, the pettiest, the most meanly odious. Self-earned private property, that is based, so to say, on the fusing together of the isolated, independent labouring individual with the conditions of his labour, is supplanted by capitalistic private property, which rests on exploitation of the nominally free labour of others, *i.e.*, on wage labour.”

These fragments suggest the ways in which the formulation of bio-power and bio-politics can profitably proceed, namely by identifying its foundational elements – primitive accumulation, laws of population, government of market economy, and violence.

IV

I shall leave the discussion here mentioning few crucial points for this meeting to discuss:

- One: Given Marx’s understanding that a forcible dissolution of the society is necessary (a view Foucault enriches but also moderates in some noticeable ways), can we say that the age of bio-politics can emerge only in the wake of violence? And if that is so, what is the place of government of the self in government of society?
- Two: if as suggested by me through this reading of *Birth of Bio-politics*, namely that the government of society through government of economy is the form of bio-politics today, what happens to government of the self? To the extent the self can be governed through techniques of self-government, we may assume that this self will be appropriate for governance of society; but, what about the resilient self? Again let us remember the words of Marx in *Grundrisse*, “Individuals producing in Society – hence socially determined individual production – is, of course, the point of departure. The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman, with whom Smith and Ricardo begin, belongs among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades, which in no way express merely a reaction against over-

sophistication and a return to a misunderstood natural life, as cultural historians imagine. As little as Rousseau's *contrat social*, which brings naturally independent, autonomous subjects into relation and connection by contract, rests on such naturalism. This is the semblance, the merely aesthetic semblance, of the Robinsonades, great and small. It is, rather, the anticipation of 'civil society', in preparation since the sixteenth century and making giant strides towards maturity in the eighteenth. In this society of free competition, the individual appears detached from the natural bonds etc. which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate. Smith and Ricardo still stand with both feet on the shoulders of the eighteenth-century prophets, in whose imaginations this eighteenth-century individual – the product on one side of the dissolution of the feudal forms of society, on the other side of the new forces of production developed since the sixteenth century – appears as an ideal, whose existence they project into the past. Not as a historic result but as history's point of departure." I submit, with this departure point, we enter a different story of government, which has to continuously re-mix the two ingredients of violence and administration.

- Three: What is the nature of the map of resistance after the birth of bio-politics? And the map of resilience? I have expressed my views on this elsewhere. But I shall not pre-empt this discussion with that.

I shall end by saying that it will be good to read Foucault in the light of Marx.