

## Roundtable Discussion on “Foucault’s Texts on the Problematic of Biopolitics”

(Abstract)

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There are many ways to address the problematic of bio-politics in Foucault’s texts, for instance tracing the relevance of the problematic itself, although in the absence of the term, back to the early literary writings by Foucault (J. Revel) or to his discussion of the “discourse of nature” in *The Order of Things* (A. Pandolfi). While I find such interpretations both legitimate and inspiring, I will concentrate on the emergence of the concepts of bio-politics and bio-power around the writing of *Discipline and Punish* (1975), in the frame of the shift from the “archaeological” to the “genealogical” method and of the Foucauldian project of a radical critique of sovereignty and law. Particularly important from this point of view are two lectures held by Foucault in Brazil («Birth of social medicine», held in 1974 in Rio de Janeiro, where the notion of bio-politics appears for the first time in his writings, and «The fabric of power», held in 1976 in Bahia). In these texts we find the link between bio-politics and population that was to remain a defining characteristic of Foucault’s reflection on the topic in the following years (as I will briefly show through an analysis of the lectures on *Security, Population, Territory, 1977-1978* and of the essay «*Omnes et singulatim. Toward a Criticism of Political Theory*», 1979). What is striking in the two Brazilian lectures is that Foucault frames his discussion of the emergence of bio-politics within a more general critical analysis of capitalism revolving around the notion of labor power (explicitly and quite extensively quoting Marx in the second text). The crisis of sovereignty as “modality or organizing schema” of power (to quote from “*Society must be defended*”) is discussed here from the point of view of the contradictions arising from the commoditization and socialization of labor power: while the technologies of discipline address the problem of the “fabrication” of individuals, of docile and useful bodies, through the “system of subjection” of a new “political anatomy”, “bio-politics” addresses through its “regulatory” devices the entire life of man-as-species, as it is represented in populations (“a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they may not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted”). While many interpreters have read the relation between discipline and bio-politics in terms of a historical transition from the former to the latter, I will emphasize that the main problem at stake in Foucault’s analysis is precisely the modality of the intertwining and articulation of disciplinary “individualizing” and bio-political “massifying” power devices (sexuality being for him one of the most important grounds of this intertwining and articulation). What I will try to do at the roundtable is to read this Foucauldian problematic through the lens of the Marxian concept of labor power – and of the peculiar intertwining of

individual and social dimensions that characterize it. While I think that such a reading may help us to better hear and to politically make sense of the “distant roar of battle” famously evoked by Foucault at the end of *Discipline and Punish*, I would like to further ask whether a possible name of the articulation of the heterogeneous power devices described by Foucault could precisely be “sovereignty” – once the concept is interpreted in a way different from its rather narrow rendering in Foucault’s analytic of power.