"What Must Live": Economist Contradictions in Foucault's Biopower

At the time of Michel Foucault's "Society Must Be Defended" lectures at the Collège de France, cultural discourse was dominated by the ideas of Freud and Marx, or in other words, psychoanalysis and Marxism. In the study of the mind and human relations, it seemed that all things could be reduced to the subconscious and the capital. However, in the series' first lecture, Foucault attempts to point out the "inhibiting effect specific to […] all-encompassing and global theories" (6) such as Marxism and psychoanalysis, which claim the ability to apply a single framework to the entirety of history. He argues that while these ideas provide certain "tools" which can be used to examine certain localized aspects of society, in this process their theoretical unity is inevitably "cut up, ripped up, torn to shreds, turned inside out […] and so on" (6). In somewhat of a protest against these totalitarian theories, he stresses that in this series of lectures, he wishes to focus on what he calls the "subjugated knowledges" (7) of history: documents and ideas that have been "buried or masked […] in formal systematizations". That is to say, Foucault claims that on the margins of conventional discourse there are bounties of historical information, complete with precious context that reveals "the dividing lines in [history] that systematic organizations are designed to mask". This marginal information is hidden in books which are written, printed, shelved and only "taken down [and read] centuries later" (4) or worse, simply used as a means to strengthen totalitarian discursive regimes, their true natures being blurred in the process. In this way, certain "genealogies" (8) or lineages of thought are given "centralizing power-effects" (9) when they are widely accepted by academia, leading them to become "anti-sciences" which suppress new and dissonant information, essentially forcing the "silence of the adversary" (12). In the case of Marxism, this systemization and forced uniformity of knowledges

has led to the assertion that "the analysis of power [can be entirely] deduced from the economy" (13). This is a supposition that Foucault dubs "economism", and essentially entails the ubiquitous analogy between "power and commodities, [or] power and wealth" (13). In short, Foucault wishes to interrogate the idea that "power [is] modelled on the commodity [as] something that can be possessed and acquired" (14) in an attempt to deracinate ideas of power from the economist totalitarianism of Marxist discourses.

By the last lecture of the series, Foucault has lead his discussion into new and unexplored territory regarding the way in which power uniquely evolved in the nineteenth century. The main result of this evolution is what he calls "power's hold over life" (239), or "biopower" (247). Where previous frameworks of disciplinary power dealt with "man-as-body" in order to "increase their productive force through exercise [or] drill" (242), the biological power that reigns over "man-as-living being" (239) is something quite different, and involves the close examination and regulation of an individual's *health* as a means to, on a larger scale, regulate an entire population's longevity. Inherent facets of life such as the "rate of reproduction [and] the fertility of a population" began to be seen as things to be measured "in statistical terms" (243) to eliminate factors that put biological strain on a nation. However, in his outlining of biopower as a modern framework of state power, Foucault seemingly forgets the mission that he set out on in his first lecture, where he claims to value the discursive power of subjugated knowledges over totalitarian discourses such as the reduction-to-capital that Marxism applies to history. While briefly summarizing Foucault's lecture on biopower, I will argue that the discussion of a regulatory biopower amounts to the outlining of a new breed of economism, a "health-economism", through which a nation sees its population's health as a measure of human capital

that can be accumulated, regulated, and ultimately maximized in in order to be translated into higher production, furthermore spurring what Foucault calls “state racism” (62) in a way that mirrors the competitive nature of rival firms in capitalism.

Foucault begins his lecture on biopower with a look into the past, historically describing sovereignty’s power-relationship with death before he begins to outline its the state’s power-relationship with life. In systems of royalty or other forms of supreme authority, one of the sovereign’s “basic attributes” was what Foucault calls “the right of life and death” (240). In theory, the sovereign had the final decision on whether any one of his subjects would be “put to death or [allowed to] live”. By this right, whether a subject is alive or dead is in theory directly owed to the “will of the sovereign” (240), and in the absence of the sovereigns decision, the subject is neutral, “by rights, neither dead nor alive”. This relationship of the subject to the sovereign raises a contradiction: since the subject is essentially “forced to [delegate power] to a sovereign […] in order to live”, the life of the subject is therefore “foundational” (241) to the power-relationship itself. That is to say, if a sovereign’s power initially stems from the life of their subjects, it is a paradox to assume that their being alive is reciprocally owed to the sovereign’s exercise of power. Here, life is essentially the ‘default’ state of human existence; it is the pre-existing, taken-for-granted modality on which the sovereign’s power is structured. The sole active use of the sovereign’s right, is therefore the “moment when the [they] can kill”. With this in mind, Foucault boils the right of life and death down to its asymmetrical truth: it “is actually the right to kill” (240). At this point, the power-relationship with life is a singular and binary one; an individual subject’s life either continues to exist, or is ended. Before the advent of

biopower, there is no conception that life is something that can be maximized, regulated, or accumulated; life is simply something that can be taken away.

However, this old right of death was soon "penetrate[d] and permeate[d]" (241) by a new form of power, causing political right to undergo a great transformation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "new technology [which was] addressed to a multiplicity of men [as] a global mass" (242) changed the perception of a human population from man-as-individual to "man-as-species". This perception of the population as a single living mass allowed human populations to be conceptualized as a whole, with a much grander scope than was previously possible; consequently, several problems that affected populations on a such a scale were now able to be attacked, examined, and ultimately eliminated. For example, one such problem was that of "illnesses prevalent in a population" (243) which "sapped the population's strength" (244) on a permanent and ongoing basis. Unlike the famous epidemics and plagues which caused "frequent deaths", the sicknesses that persisted in a population, "endemics" (243) as Foucault calls them, were not problems because of death toll, but because they caused "fall in production and [were] expensive" (244) to treat. Biopower, then, is the power which is constantly acting against these inhibiting factors of human health. Where in sovereignty, life was considered the default state of the subject which the sovereign had the power to disrupt, under biopower it is instead "death [which is] permanent, something that […] perpetually gnaws at [life], diminishes it and weakens it" (244), and therefore must be kept at bay at all costs. The way in which power acts on the subject, therefore, has been inverted; the sovereign's right was active solely in the moment where they may "inflict death" (240), and biopower is active in its ability to "make live" (241). To facilitate this, certain systems began to develop, such as the "development of […]

public hygiene", along with "institutions [which] coordinate medical care, centralize power, and normalize knowledge" in order to make the state better equipped to treat illnesses and "medicalize the population" (244). Here, we see the first suggestions that Foucault's system of biopower seemingly treats human health in a way that resembles economism's ever-present focus on wealth. Similar to how educational systems in a capitalist society are merely instruments to magnify human capital in the form of knowledge or skills, biopower is made up of the systems which magnify human health; just as these educational systems incentivize the maximization of human capital in order to ultimately boost the production of a nation and ultimately increase the statistic of profit, biopower's purpose is outlined as a series of systems which incentives the maximization and distribution of human health.

The specific problems that biopower combats, and the ways in which biopower is applied to combat these problems are numerous and varied. For example, there is the problem of productiveness being eroded by natural causes such as minor endemic diseases and old age, both of which "incapacitate individuals" making them unable to work or contribute to society in a tangible and statistical way. Another example is the way in which biopower is in constant battle with "milieu in which [humans] live" (245). Foucault points out the "direct effects" on a person's health that comes as a result of their "geographical, climatic, or hydrographic environment". In particular, "the existence of swamps" and urban environments which have been "created by the population and therefore [have] effects on that population" (245) are areas of great concern to biopower. Though swamps, urban environments, old age, and minor sicknesses seem to be disparate in the ways that they negatively affect human health, biopower acts on them with the same level of scrutiny because of the fact that they create unpredictable outliers. As Foucault

describes, biopower's purpose is ultimately to "maintain an average [and] establish a sort of homeostasis", modifying birth rates, mortality rates, and other "random element[s] inherent in a population" (246) so that a constant and predictable average level of health can be achieved. However, someone under the effect of environmental, endemic, or age-related problems causes this average to be upset, taking the population out of equilibrium. Much like the way Marxist thought aims to eliminate disparity in economies through the even redistribution of wealth and capital, the systems of biopower act to eliminate disparities in populations by ensuring a regularized distribution of health across all of a population's individuals.

After discussing the problems and mechanisms that drove biopower's development throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Foucault poses the question of war. If biopower has truly supplanted sovereign power as the dominant form of political right, how can the idea of killing other humans en masse in a wartime setting remain permissible? Surely the same societal compulsion that constructed the systems of biopower, whose "basic function is to improve life" (254) cannot also justify the millions of deaths that war causes. Foucault explains that this juncture is where "racism intervenes". In fact, it is through the ideas of biopower that racism is "inscribed as the basic mechanism of power" (254) in a modern state. To understand this seemingly contradictory relationship between life-maximizing biopower and life-annihilating racial warfare, Foucault attempts to boil racism down to its elemental parts. It is, in short, "a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population" (255). This conception of racism, once removed from cultural or geographic specificities, can be understood through the concept of the Other, something or someone that is unfamiliar or dissimilar to oneself. Once this "caesura within the population" (255) has been made and each individual has been categorized

into “subspecies known […] as races” (255), the state’s use of biopower can be focused; if there is an acknowledgement that certain subsections of a population are “described as good and that others [are] described as inferior”, then the systems of biopower can be used to only benefit whatever subsections of the population deemed more important.

In addition to the splitting up and classification of a population, Foucault describes that racism has a “second function” (255) in its relationship to biopower: that of instilling a subtle undercurrent of murder in a population that encourages the death of the Other. By characterizing subsections of the population as “degenerates” (252) which will continue through generations to be a detriment to the health of the population, racism allows an individual to feel justified in waging a biological war. In the same way that biopower compels the population to maximize health through the elimination of random elements, it feeds the idea that “the fewer degenerates there will be[…] the stronger [and] more vigorous [one] will be” (255). That is to say, biopower reinforces not only the accumulability of health in a population, but also its finitude. A biopower-centric state will carefully allocate health away from the other, allowing its favoured citizens to thrive while the Other is starved of health-boosting infrastructures. Though Foucault states that he is firmly against the economist reductions of power to commodity, this facet of biopower’s consequences has strong similarities to the workings of a competitive capitalist economy. In competitive markets, most firms have the simple goal of outdoing their competitors in the attainment of profit and capital. Any unit of profit that a firm gains is important not only for its monetary value, but the simple fact that it is *not* fuelling the enterprises of a rival firm. One needs only to replace “firm” with “race” and “profit” with “health”, and this almost exactly mirrors the way that Foucault proposes that a state behaves after having adopted biopower. By

introducing health as an aspect of life that can be maximized, biopower situates it as a measure of biological success in a race, therefore enabling it to be reduced down to a commodified and economized subject.

In the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, Michel Foucault speaks with twin objectives. Firstly, he wishes to uncover subjected knowledges of history, thereby reviving the "indestructible secret societies" (5) of historical theory, in the process dismantling the power-effects of dominant totalitarian discourses such as the universal reduction-to-capital of Marxism. Secondly, he outlines a theory of conflict developing through the nineteenth century based around the regulation of humanity on a biological, species-wide scale through systems of biopower. Though these objectives when taken on their own have incredibly deep theoretical merit, the commodification and maximization of health that make up the foundations of biopower bear a startling resemblance to the totalitarian economist discourses that Foucault is initially so suspicious, thereby casting his dismissal of dominant discourses in a contrarian and dogmatic light. By analyzing the hyper-controlling method with which biopower regulates random elements in a population, to the racial competition of eliminating the Other to guarantee one's own biological existence, the structures of biopower act in very similar ways to those of capitalism and socialism. Although it is important to note the inhibiting effects of dominant schools of thought, by incorporating aspects of these discourses into a synthesis of new ideas, theorists may attain a more whole understanding of the world we live in.

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Works Cited

Foucault, Michel. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collége de France*, *1975-76*. Picador, 2003.