

Biopolitics: The History of a Concept

The history of biopolitics has not been researched so far. To be more precise, we still do not have a systematic and thorough history of the very concept “biopolitics”. A history of this kind, a history of biopolitics as a concept, constitutes the aim of this research project. We do possess historical studies on techniques of power and relations of “biopower”, including studies tracing biopolitics to the early Greek origins of Western political tradition, modern technologies of discipline and punishment and contemporary analyses of how life sciences influence our understanding of politics, but there’s still no systematic analysis of how the very term “biopolitics” emerged and was used throughout the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century. With the current situation of global COVID-19 pandemic transforming the very fabric of social relations, one expects “biopolitics” to become an universal tool in political theory and social sciences in analysis of changing relations of power in modern societies? But will it really? The few propositions to analyse the current pandemic from the perspective of “biopolitics” testify rather to the failure of the perspective to provide useful insight or conceptual tools to deal with the current crisis. It is as if the notion that made an incredible career in global academia in recent decades, facing the actual reality of the problem that it was supposed to describe – the intersection of politics and biological life – turned out to be nothing more than an empty concept with no reference to social and political reality. If we want to understand the way contemporary political theory, philosophy and social sciences analyse our societies with the use of the term “biopolitics”, we need to trace the history of the concept itself. And what a history that is! It might not be an accident that the history of the concept of “biopolitics” is coextensive with the 20th century itself. What can the history of this concept teach us about the notion of politics which we inherited for the 21st century?