Biopower: the fate of an idea

Convenor: Neil Vickers
Assessment: 4000 word essay
Teaching Pattern: 10 x 2 hour seminars

This course is intended for students taking the M.Sc in the Medical Humanities and for others interested in the intellectual legacies of Michel Foucault. At its heart is the concept of biopower, first sketched in volume 1 of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. Foucault believed that a new type of power emerged at or near the beginning of the nineteenth century, characterised on the one hand by discipline and, on the other, by the enforcement of *norms*. Discipline was administered by the courts and enforced in prisons, schools, and hospitals, and on the factory floor; but these institutions increasingly took note of the opinion of all kinds of professional witnesses. Foucault wrote a book and made a documentary about the case of one Pierre Rivière who in 1835 admitted cutting the throats of his mother, sister and brother. Rivière became a ‘case’ by virtue of the unprecedented horde of experts who offered expert testimony on his behaviour. About this time, the state began to record data on births, deaths, sickness, suicide, fertility rates and housing. Great webs of bureaucracy were established to help the state accomplish these purposes. Foucault was especially interested in the ways in which these networks focused on individual citizens’ *bodies*. Biopower was the name Foucault gave to used to refer to the activities of public health authorities, prison reformers, educationalists, psychiatrists and other actors charged with managing risks to physical health. They were collectively involved in biopolitics.

The first half of this course will be devoted to Foucault’s thinking about biopower in general. We will begin by looking at his early thinking on madness, and on the general characteristics of expert discourses before moving on to his work on the history of sexuality and on security, territory and ‘governmentality’. In the second half of the course, we will consider how others have sought to develop this vision in relation to specific contemporary biopolitical discourses.

**Indicative running order of seminars**

Week 1: From archaeology to genealogy: in the beginning was Foucault
Week 2: Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*
Week 3: Foucault, extracts from *Psychiatric Power*
Week 4: Foucault, extracts from *Society Must Be Defended!*
Week 5: Foucault, extracts from *The History of Sexuality* (all 3 volumes)
Week 6: The mind. Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*
Week 7: The body. George Agamben, *Homo Sacer*
Week 8: Gender. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (especially Chapter 3)
Week 9: The genome: Nikolas Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself*
Week 10: Politics: Negri and Hardt, *Empire*
Learning Outcomes:

By the end of the module, students will be able to demonstrate wide and deep knowledge of one of the most important concepts in the medical humanities and in critical theory more generally. Students will gain a thorough knowledge of primary texts by Foucault, Hacking, Agamben, Butler, Rose and Negri and Hardt. They will be encouraged to consider these authors’ claims in the light of contemporary developments in medicine, the humanities, and the social sciences.

Core reading


Selected further reading


Holmberg, B. 2005, *Biomass coordinating council of the Americas over the top with biomass producing biofuels, biopower, and biobased products*.


