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Biopolitics and utopia: an interdisciplinary reader edited by Patricia Stapleton and Andrew Byers.

Summary: "Biopolitics and Utopia explores the intersection of biopolitics and utopian thought. As an interdisciplinary work, it addresses many salient biopolitical issues (state and medical interventions in the body, fears over scientific progress, resistance to state biopower, and ethical concerns), while also engaging in the utopian drive behind biopolitical efforts. The book is structured into four main sections: Actions, Speculations, Reactions, and Reflections. The chapters in Actions examine the practices of direct, medical intervention to 'normalize' citizens' bodies. The next section, Speculations, approaches the intersection of utopia and biopolitics through a literary lens, reviewing science fiction texts as expressions of cultural and social fears about scientific progress. Reactions outlines potential acts of resistance in the face of biopower. Finally, Reflections offers a more philosophical essay, which engages the reader in the potential for creating an ethics for scientific standards"—Provided by publisher.

Summary: "This reader offers a fascinating exploration of the intersection of biopolitics and utopia by employing a range of theoretical approaches. Each essay provides a unique application of the two concepts to topics spanning the social sciences and humanities"—Provided by publisher.


Introduction

Andrew Byers and Patricia Stapleton

At its most literal, biopolitics is the merger of life with politics. Though the term biopolitics dates to the early decades of the twentieth century, it was only in the 1970s in the work of Michel Foucault that the idea of biopolitics, or “biopower” as he often described it, came to be understood as a fundamental and constitutive aspect of governance. Foucault defined biopower as the “explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations,” as well as the set of mechanisms through which “the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy.” This refers not just to the power of life and death possessed by absolute monarchs in the premodern period, but also to the eventual control by even modern states and liberal democracies over how life within society would be lived and experienced.

Since the formation of the modern state system, governments have sought to exercise greater control over the lives and, increasingly, the bodies of their subjects and citizens. Indeed, entire disciplines of study—statistics, demography, epidemiology, and public health, among them—have arisen as highly politicized forms of knowledge, making possible the ability to better analyze and regulate (“govern”) individuals and society as a whole and involving processes of “correction, exclusion, normalization, disciplining, therapeutics, and optimization.” Thus, the biological aspects of society, and the biology of the individual members of society, have come to be carefully managed by the state for its own ends. While biopolitical interventions by a state—and their most terrible effects on human bodies and lives—might be most visible in the large-scale eugenics programs practiced by authoritarian and liberal democracies alike in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,
contemporary areas of biopolitical concern are expansive, covering virtually the entirety of human existence, including reproduction, sexuality, physical and mental health, food consumption, appearance, and day-to-day activities, among many other areas. Indeed, biopolitics and biopolitical concerns play into all aspects of the functions of a state, from state formation to state maintenance and expansion; states have been and remain concerned with the management of populations to produce order and stability as well as managing an expanding population base from which state power can grow.

Over the course of the last two centuries, surveillance and disciplinary techniques—greatly aided by technological advances in the last several decades—have been developed for regulating the behaviors and bodies of ever larger populations with the goal of transforming them into “manageable subjects.”¹ It is easy to perceive the disciplinary and surveillant nature of the modern state at work within the institutions of society where these are most explicit—prisons, schools, the military, for example—though as Gilles Deleuze pointed out, “societies of control” operate not simply by confining citizens in carceral institutions (though they do that too), but also through mechanisms of control permeated throughout society.⁵ Control over human bodies, and therefore human behaviors and lives, is the means to a utopian end, in which these created “manageable subjects” will be cooperative, productive, and reproductive. To be clear, however, just as with other efforts at state control, individual and societal resistance to the imposition of large-scale biopolitical regulations is an important limiting factor on such efforts. Indeed, Foucault asserted the criticality of such resistance: “If there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience…. So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance.”⁶ Thus, recognition of and resistance to biopolitical regulation can be profoundly transformative, producing new discourses, ideas, and social norms about biopolitics and the body.

Bodies are the mechanisms over which biopolitical power is exercised, and it is through the continual surveillance and disciplining of the body that the modern subject is subordinated to the state.⁷ Before exploring these issues further, we should make clear that we do not take the term “body” as a self-evident concept. Sociologist Bryan Turner has described the body as “at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphysical, ever present and ever distant thing—a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity.”⁸ We all
have one, but grasping the nature of the body and making analytic
and methodological sense of it is the challenge. It is important that we
not simply invoke “the body” as a kind of generic object of study, as
that tends to blur the distinctions between and among bodies; we need
to ground bodies conceptually and historically, locating them spatially
and temporally. As Elizabeth Grosz has pointed out, “bodies are never
simply human bodies or social bodies [emphasis in original].” With this
in mind, Kathleen Canning has suggested that there are a number of
different bodies to be investigated by scholars—among them, the social
body as a whole; bodies as they are represented rhetorically and textu-
ally (and, we would add, visually); bodies as sites of experiences—for
example, wounds and pregnancy—that indelibly shape them; and bod-
ies as objects of regulation by the state and other institutions—all of
which are explored in various ways by the authors in this collection.

The biopolitical explorations in this volume fit within a larger litera-
ture; questions of the body and whether and how it may be regulated
by the state have dominated modern politics for much of the twentieth
century and into the present. In describing biopolitics, Foucault argued
that “the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population
constitute the two poles around which the organization of power over
life was deployed.” For Foucault, discipline is a mechanism of power
that regulates the behavior—and the bodies—of individuals within the
social or political body through regulation of space, time, and activities,
enforced through a complex, almost ubiquitous system of surveillance,
ultimately creating bodies that are at once docile, disciplined, and pro-
ductive. This disciplinary power is part of what Foucault describes as
“governmentality,” in which officials and “experts” monitor, measure,
and normalize individuals and entire populations through diffuse
means, including public discourse, with an eye toward promoting par-
ticular models of health and personal behavior.

In many ways, governmentality is the key linkage between biopoli-
tics and utopia; it is “the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures,
analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exer-
cise of this very specific, albeit very complex power, which has as its
target the population, as its major form of knowledge political economy,
and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security.” Thus it
is through governmentality that states strive to create the citizens best
suited to fulfilling the utopian aspirations of the state, whatever those
goals may be—for example, a productive, populous, physically fit citi-
zenry compliant with the demands of the state. The state’s acceptance
of individuals as full citizens of society is highly contingent; factors as
diverse as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and compliance with legalities, all play important roles in elevating or denying rights and freedoms to individuals. The consequences of biopolitical interventions and regulation are significant for individuals: not only do citizens become implicit or unwitting participants of the utopian experiment of the state, but they (and their bodies) also become regulated by the institutions and discourses of the state. Moreover, they are educated and trained throughout their lives to monitor and regulate their own behavior and bodies, in keeping with the goals of the state. Eventually monitoring and policing by state institutions could become almost secondary to self-monitoring and self-policing.

It is worth exploring exactly how and in what ways theorists have conceived of the idea of utopia as it applies to biopolitics in the modern world. Utopian scholarship encompasses a broad range of analytic approaches, and objects of study, which provides a great strength to the field, but a persistent problem in the field of utopian studies is the very definition of the term “utopia.” Without such a consensus there can be little agreement on the very object of study.¹⁴ Countless definitions have been offered. Ruth Levitas, one of the foremost utopian theorists, proposes a number of possibilities. She suggests that utopia might simply be defined as “how we would live and what kind of a world we would live in if we could do just that.”¹⁵ Levitas goes on to note that sometimes utopia embodies more than an image of what the good life would be and becomes a claim about what it could and should be: the wish that things might be otherwise becomes a conviction that it does not have to be like this. Utopia is then not just a dream to be enjoyed, but a vision to be pursued. . . . Those utopians who seek to make their dreams come true are deemed to be hopelessly unrealistic, or worse, actively dangerous.¹⁶

The chapters in this collection will examine a number of biopolitical utopian ideas that may have once seemed “hopelessly unrealistic,” but with recent and near-future scientific developments, appear more realistic with every passing day. Many of these ideas, especially if put into practice, might well be considered “actively dangerous.” In Levitas’s most recent work on utopia, she goes on to describe utopia as perhaps being better framed as a method than as a goal, a method she describes as the “imaginary reconstitution of society.”¹⁷ For at least some, if not most, writers, philosophers, and theorists, such a conception of utopia likely does involve an imaginary reconstruction. The essays in this
collection cover a broad range of utopian efforts and ideas, some of which do remain firmly in the realm of the imagination, while others, involving the efforts of some scientists, governments, and public policy advocates, range away from the strictly imaginary and into the realm of the real, or at least serious attempts to map utopian imaginings onto the real world, regardless of whether these ideas are ever fully realized.

In this volume, each author engages in some way with the utopian drive to control the body through the biopower of the state, to make those bodies reproductive, productive, disciplined, fit, homogeneous, normalized, or any other desirable set of traits, whether it is through a direct physical intervention or through the indirect training of citizens to instill self-regulatory practices. These biopolitical interventions may impact the individual body, the social body, or both, but all reveal the state’s interest in perfecting its citizens. The chapters included in the volume cover a wide range of disciplines from across the social sciences and humanities: history, political science, women’s and gender studies, bioethics, literature, and philosophy. Despite the diversity of topics represented by these fields, the authors reveal common characteristics in their treatment of utopia and biopolitics. Although links can be made among all of the chapters, we have organized the book into four sections to illustrate the main intersections of these two concepts.

In the first section, Actions, three chapters examine the practices of direct, medical intervention to “normalize” citizens’ bodies. The individual body has become the site for such intervention because of some perceived failing, whether that be in physical ability, in reproductive capability, or in sexual characteristics. As a result, either through government effort or social pressure, individuals seek bodily “perfection.” Andrew Byers addresses these issues in a historical review of the American government’s efforts to engender a new American identity and conception of the body, one that would be healthy, physically fit, and thus capable of serving the nation militarily or otherwise in a time of war. He reviews the state’s attempts to promote voluntary programs of physical fitness and their inherent utopian impulses. Byers concludes that the legacy of governmental interventions on American bodies is decidedly mixed, with the physical representations of bodies established during wartime having had a lasting impact on ideas about what constitutes an “ideal” body. Arpita Das also addresses societal stereotypes of what a “normal” body should be. To do so, she analyzes instances in which intersex and disabled bodies are categorized as “abnormal” and as “exceptions” in comparison to the normative body stereotype. Das shows how intersex and disabled bodies are alternately labeled as
“weak” and as “threats,” challenging the conception of what “normal” means. In contrast to the US government’s efforts to prepare American bodies for military service, Patricia Stapleton’s work reveals the absence of direct government regulation in the field of reproductive medicine. Yet, this absence demonstrates just as much a desire for perfecting potential American bodies as the clear efforts to increase the physical fitness of American citizens. Specifically, Stapleton’s review of regulatory practices regarding preimplantation genetic diagnosis in fertility treatments illustrates how the lack of government regulation allows the “right” kinds of citizens to be born.

Speculations, the second section of the volume, pairs chapters that explore the intersection of utopia and biopolitics through a literary lens. Evie Kendal and Selena Middleton refer to science fiction texts in their respective works, and these references are employed as a starting point to examine how science fiction can reflect political and cultural fears about biotechnology. Both Kendal and Middleton are inherently dealing with the future tense, speculating over what new technologies might bring forth. Kendal explores the motivations for science fiction references in biopolitical debates, particularly in reference to genetic engineering in human biology. She finds that the present usage advances a socially conservative agenda because of the selected negative portrayals of the potential of new technologies; the most frequently used science fiction references are from technophobic cautionary tales that dramatize the threats posed to humanity. Similarly, Middleton looks at the fearful human response to future technologies presented in literature. She relies on the discourses of contemporary environmental movements and their concerns about genetically modified crops to analyze the fiction of Paolo Bacigalupi, finding that Bacigalupi’s writing reflects the effects that social structures have on the role of science. Kendal and Middleton, respectively, call for the development of a positive relationship between the sciences and the humanities, suggesting that there is great potential in such a relationship to prepare society for the impacts of technological progress.

In the third section, Reactions, the authors turn to potential acts of resistance in the face of biopower. Elena Cohen explores the relationship between the Occupy Wall Street social movement and space, by looking at issues of resistance, power, security, sovereignty, discipline, governmentality, and biopolitics. She probes Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia,” building links between his conception of the term and the activities of the Occupy movement. Cohen concludes that the Occupy movement may be considered a hegemony-challenging heterotopia,
providing resistance to the biopower of the state. In contrast to Cohen’s focus on the citizen body and control over it through the regulation of space, Rasmus Simonsen turns our attention to the animal body and humans’ relationship to meat. He focuses on a tenet of utopia that highlights freedom from scarcity in his treatment on veganism and the production of in vitro meat. Like the Occupiers challenging the status quo, Simonsen makes the case that veganism must continue to disrupt or deviate from the central social directionality of consuming animal products to remain effective.

Finally, the volume concludes with Reflections. Cameron Barrows offers an essay more philosophical in tone, requiring readers to reflect on the ethical dilemmas presented by modern-day science. He notes that the role of science since the Enlightenment has been focused upon the improvement and categorization of the body, and that science seems oblivious to its own utopian ideology. Barrows concludes that if biotechnology is part of our human future, we must develop an ethics determining the standards for its use.

Note that this collection is not comprehensive in terms of its coverage of biopolitical issues, nor is it intended to be. Rather, it attempts to sketch out some of the possibilities for how biopolitics and biopolitical debates have played out in the modern world, or could in the near future. For the most part, the essays in this collection deal with new and emergent areas of biopolitical interest (e.g., assisted reproductive technologies), many of which are enabled by recent and future scientific and technical developments, as well as areas that have not yet received sufficient scholarly attention (e.g., governmental promotion of fitness and health), rather than some of the most obvious forms of biopolitical intervention that have already received considerable analysis (e.g., eugenics). As such, this collection provides the reader with the opportunity to review some of the breadth of the actions, speculations, reactions, and reflections on contemporary biopolitical debates.

Notes


3. Lemke, Biopolitics, 5.


11. Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 139.

12. For a concise summary of this concept, see Turner, Body & Society, 3–4.


15. Ibid., 1.

16. Ibid.


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