

Right of Death and Power Over Life

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The Death Penalty

- The death penalty is the counterpart to war—the sovereign's reply to violators
- The number of its victims decreases as the number of victims of war increases
- The reason is that putting people to death violates the end of ensuring, sustaining, and multiplying life
- Only those presenting a biological danger to others could be executed in the name of life

Classical Power Over Life

- The ancient original source of power over life was the Roman right of the father to dispose of the life he created
- This was extended, in a more limited form, to the sovereign as a response to threats, internal and external
- Power over life was negative, symbolized by the sword, which can only take or allow life
- The more basic source of the power might have been as a means of seizure (cf. taxes)

The Rituals of Death

- In classical culture, death was the passage from the hands of one sovereign to another
- The rituals of death were, thus, political
- Now, death is the limit of life, and it is an embarrassment to the forces promoting life
- Suicide is a puzzlement, and as such becomes an object of early sociological study

Modern Power Over Life

- Modern power is positive and multifarious
- Its aim is to cultivate forces through order
- The right take life is now subservient to the cultivation of life
- This has led to wars of mass destruction in the name of life, though at the mass level
- The principle defining the strategy of states is that one must be able to take life in order to go on living

Two Forms of Power Over Life

- Two interacting forms of power over life have emerged since the 17th century
- An anatomo-politics of the human body treats it as a machine, disciplining it
- A bio-politics of the body treats it biologically, regulating it
- This bi-polar technology is about the investment of life, rather than the right to kill

Bio-Power

- On the side of discipline, schools, barracks, workshops, etc. formed
- On the side of biology, population, health, migration etc. were studied
- This began an era of “bio-power,” in which the body is subjugated and populations controlled
- It is not to be understood through ideology, but through its concrete arrangements in the 19th century

The Threshold of Modernity

- Power no longer concerns the power of the sovereign over life, but mastery over life itself
- There are limits
- Starvation exists on a large scale outside the West
- Biology makes it possible to destroy ourselves
- The human being is no longer an Aristotelian rational animal with political capacities
- “Modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question”

Bio-Power and Capitalism

- The growth of bio-power and of capitalism went hand-in-hand
- Capitalism needed control over bodies as machines of production
- But it also needed control over the larger forces of life
- So many techniques of power were created

The Consequences of Bio-Power

- Scientific discourse was greatly affected
- Man is outside of history insofar as he exists in a biological environment
- But he exists inside history as well, in that our knowledge-power affects the course of our development
- Many political technologies developed as well

The Entry of Life into History

- Ascetic morality was important for capitalism
- But more important was the entry of the phenomena of life into political techniques
- Power and knowledge were now concerned with life, diminishing the effects of starvation and disease
- Attention could be turned to modifying life
- “Part of it passed into knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention”

The Norm vs. the Law

- Classical society was governed by the juridical system of law, whose sanction was death
- Bio-power is concerned with regulating life, by qualifying, measuring, appraising, and placing in hierarchies
- The law is now based on norms, which regulate society through many apparatuses

The New Struggle

- Struggle now looks forward, rather than to the restoration of something lost in the past
- It claims life as its objective, looking it is basic needs and realization of its potential
- Examples are “rights” to life, health, happiness, satisfaction of needs
- These are not derived from anything in the classical juridical system

Sanguinity and Sexuality

- Classical society is one of blood symbols—blood relations, sacrifice of blood, etc.
- Modern society is one of sexual “analytics”
- The themes are health, progeny, race, future of the species, vitality of the social body
- Sex was the dual object of excitement and fear
- It is on the side of norm, knowledge, life, meaning, the disciplines, regulation

Sex as a Political Issue

- Sex lies at the intersection between discipline of the body and regulation of population
- It is a means of access to the life of the body and the life of the species
- Concern with it gave rise to a micropower of the body
- This explains the preoccupation with sex in the 19th century
- It became the locus of political activity, e.g., raising standards of morality and population control

The Transition

- The transition from the symbolics of blood to the analytics of sex was not abrupt
- The administration of sexuality has been haunted with the symbolics of blood
- This is the basis of racism
- Nazism was the most cunning and naïve marriage of the two
- The irony is that Hitler’s sexual program was ineffective, but his concern for blood led to the greatest blood-bath in history

Four Great Lines of Attack

- Discipline relying on regulation:
- The sexualization of children, to prevent early activity thought harmful to the species
- The hysterization of women, in the name of the health of the family
- Regulation relying on discipline:
- Birth control
- Psychiatrization of perversions

Psychoanalysis

- The other side of the classical regime was the rule of law, order, sovereignty
- The psychoanalysts were suspicious of the fascist attempt to regulate sexuality
- Against this, Freud tried to revert to the old form against the regulatory aspect of bio-power
- He tried to ground sexuality in the law, “to surround desire with all the trappings of the old order of power”

