

Biopolitics of World War II Hawai'i and Modern Day America

Can the optimization and extension of life ever be morally wrong? In the debate between autonomy and paternalism, people disagree on the balance between individual opinions and governmental judgements. Proponents of paternalism generally assume that governmental actions to extend and optimize life are morally good, and it is merely the implementation of these policies that causes tension between individual liberty and governmental authority. However, French philosopher Michel Foucault offers new insight into governmental regulations with his theory of biopolitics, which examines the intersection between human life and politics. Although acts of paternalism are supposed to serve the best interest of the people, by delving into Foucault's theory of biopolitics through the specific context of public health policies in World War II Hawai'i and COVID-19 America, it becomes clear that the optimization of life prioritizes the interests of the state.

Foucault's philosophy offers a framework to examine governmental control of a population, tracking a shift in the way power is organized in the modern state. Instead of a sovereign power that exists in relation to an individual, Foucault explains the modern government's more diffuse and extensive power over an entire population in terms of a shift from "the right to take life or let live" (Foucault 241) to "the right to make live and to let die" (Foucault 241). In lieu of the power to kill individuals for misconduct ("to take life or let live"), modern expansion of technologies of power such as education and healthcare have given the current government the power to either extend people's lives ("to make live") or to let people die from lack of resources and other societal issues. The state has a vested interest in extending and optimizing the life of its people, as an increase in life duration results in people that can labor longer and fulfill more functions for the state. However, Foucault argues that it is impossible to

“make live” without “let die,” since the state will channel its resources to support the lives it deems valuable at the expense of other lives. Foucault uses the term “racism” (Foucault 254) to describe this break between life and death, although his use of the term refers not to racial discrimination against ethnic minorities but instead to discrimination against a separated group within a population, such as those who are criminals, low-income, etc. Public health is the science of extending and optimizing life and thus can be viewed as the culmination of the biopolitics of regulating life. Since biopolitics offers a framework to understand the current governmental system, analyzing how Foucault’s conception of “make live” and “let die” apply to modern public health can provide deeper insight into the complexity of paternalism.

Biopolitics can be examined through the implementation of public health policies in World War II Hawai’i, where the biopolitics of optimizing life was used for the morally ambiguous purpose of expanding military power and nationalist sentiment. Two key public health policies during this time were compulsory vaccinations and blood donations, which were used by the US government to push the narrative of the military state as a protector of health for all Americans regardless of racial identity. However, Juliet Nebolon, an assistant professor of American Studies, analyzes these public health policies as simultaneous forms of settler colonialism and militarization through a phrase she calls “settler militarism” (Nebolon 25). These policies largely ignore the settler colonial history of spreading diseases that eradicated indigenous populations—the US is vaccinating indigenous people against the diseases that they themselves introduced. Additionally, Nebolon notes that these public health policies were asserted to support “racial liberalism” (Nebolon 23) despite serving to strengthen White supremacy. Racial minorities were often forced to donate more blood than their White counterparts to prove American patriotism, otherwise risking fines, imprisonment, and

internment camps. There is a certain irony in how minorities were forced to freely give up their blood, especially when blood has the symbolic meaning of an individual's life force. Biopolitics during warfare is paradoxical in that the people "made to live" serve as a biological resource that results directly in the "let die" of the casualties of war. More subtly, however, the biopolitics of medical knowledge strengthens the power of the state and provides excuses for governmental racial harms and discrimination, complicating the viewpoint that governmental actions to extend and optimize life is inherently and unconditionally good.

Although issues with public health policies are currently viewed from an individual's standpoint of paternalism intruding on individual autonomy, Foucault's theory of biopolitics illustrates how all paternalistic actions to improve people's lives are done for the benefit of the government and not the individual. It is difficult to argue against a government system that optimizes life, and it is just as difficult to imagine a regime that does not follow Foucault's theory of biopolitics. However, it is important to consider the implications of which lives have been valued over others. With the COVID-19 pandemic affecting people all over the world, the topic of viruses, vaccines, and public health has recently been thrust under public scrutiny. The ongoing debate of the balance between public health and the economy clearly reflects the "make live" and "let die" description of biopolitics, as certain lives are willingly risked and sacrificed to improve the economy. Whether or not current public health policies are a governmental overstep is still left up to the debate between autonomy and paternalism, but it is important to realize that the optimization of life is not inherently good when it comes at the cost of other lives.

Although modern public health can be viewed through the lens of autonomy and paternalism, biopolitics reminds us that it is important to remember the contexts in which paternalism arises. The modern conception of public health is a technique of governance left

from a wartime state of emergency, and the vaccination and blood bank programs today are a direct result of the public health programs in place during World War II. Paternalism has historically been used to obscure violence against the population, where the language of medicine and politics is used to evade responsibility for historical wrongdoings. Despite the fact that it is difficult to imagine a world in which we rebel against the optimization of life, we must actively resist the way paternalism sacrifices the lives of the most vulnerable to ensure its own health.

Works Cited

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