BODY, POWER, POPULATION
AN INTRODUCTION TO BIOPOLITICS

Social science scholarship has lately turned to ‘biopolitics’. The term broadly refers to exercises of power that govern the life of a population, in a continuous and permanent manner, where ‘population’ is produced by institutional mechanisms of control and exclusion. The turn to biopolitics offers a critique of the concept of liberal state as guarantor of rights, which shares an idea of sovereignty that goes back to Hobbes. Sovereignty is seen to lie in the head of state that organizes individuals and institutions in terms of natural bodies and an artificial body politic in the Hobbesian tradition. The biopolitical thus studies the effects of power on human bodies under capitalism, moving away from a model of ‘consciousness’, to institutions like prison, to conditions like concentration camps, and to forms of life rendered abject without politics. A different body of multitude emerges here, which sheds new light on the rationality of governance, also referred to as governmentality, and the investment of certain forms of scientific knowledge in exercising domination. Such a perspective widens the ambit of political and deepens the sense of economic, by creating a new field to study the forms of subjection in the capitalist order.

To follow these shifts we need to engage with historical and empirical studies as well as theoretical formulations that are critical in framing biopolitics. The course aims to do this by taking up centrally two thinkers, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, although other philosophers, critics and commentators are referred to outline the biopolitical perspective. The emerging insights are tested against a number of case studies dealing with non-European and the Indian context in particular, while students are introduced to the major critiques of Foucault and Agamben’s work. In the process, the course takes up the discussion of critique as a practice and philosophical tradition with regard to the study of biopolitics. The course thus extends the analysis of neoliberal capitalism beyond political economy into other areas that mark the close interface of society and state apparatuses. The category of state as a result will open up to questions of power at work in different levels, for instance, with regard to practical fields like public policy and development planning. Thus, bringing together recent political theorizing and their implications for empirical studies in politics, the course is expected to throw up new research agendas and critical insights that are valuable for an understanding of Indian experiences.

Students are expected to present two mid-semester assignments, apart from taking an end-semester examination, and taking part in the discussions in the class.
(Underlined readings are to be treated as essential readings)

Theme 1

Body Politic

The readings under this theme are meant to introduce the conceptual correlation of body and bodypolitic in political philosophy, extending from mediaeval political theology to Hobbes, as a background for the biopolitical perspective.


Supplementary Reading

Theme 2

Body/Power

This segment introduces students to the early writings of Michel Foucault dealing with the shift in the exercise of juridical power and how power is inscribed on the body in modern disciplinary regimes. Supplementary readings offer Indian cases to illustrate ways of engaging the biopolitical framework.


Supplementary Reading

Theme 3
**Biopolitics 1: Governmentality**

This segment introduces students to later writings of Michel Foucault elaborating the concept of governmentality and how it converges with biopolitical practices in the late capitalist system.


*Supplementary Reading*


Theme 4
**Biopolitics 2: State of Exception**

Readings under this theme familiarizes students with the writings of Giorgio Agamben, especially the notion of ‘bare life’ and the ‘camp’ as a paradigm of modernity. Supplementary readings explore the insights of Agamben in relation to other major writings on statelessness as a modern condition.

4. Carl Schmitt, Chapter 3: Political Theology in *Political Theology*.

*Supplementary Reading*

K. Marx, 'On The Jewish Question’, 1844
Theme 5

**Fields of Biopolitics**

This segment discusses select case studies from the non-European and Indian contexts in order to explore how the biopolitical perspective can be productively engaged from locations altogether different from what has been addressed by Foucault and Agamben.

1. *Introduction by Jean Paul Satre in Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 1961.*
2. *Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', Public Culture 15(1), 2003*

*Supplementary Reading*


Theme 6

**Critique as Practice**

Before we take up the critiques of Foucault and Agamben’s work, it is necessary to introduce students to the philosophical practice of critique and its centrality to the Enlightenment tradition. The readings in this segment aim to do this along with a discussion of Foucault’s contribution to critique as radical practice.

1. Immanuel Kant, ‘What Is Enlightenment?’

*Supplementary Reading*

“I am sure that you are more pessimistic than I am…”: An Interview with Giorgio Agamben, *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 16 no. 2, April 2004.
Gilles Deleuze, ‘Foldings, or the Inside of Thought (Subjectivation)’, in *Foucault*, 1988

Theme 7
**Critique of Biopolitics 1**

This segment takes up the major philosophical critiques of Michel Foucault's work and the debates and responses that have followed in their wake.


**Supplementary Readings**
Bradley J. Macdonald, ‘Marx, Foucault, Genealogy’, Polity * Volume 34, Number 3 * Spring 2002

Theme 8
**Critique of Biopolitics 2**

The readings in this section deals with the major critiques of Agamben’s work and the ensuing debates.

3. Thomas Lemke, ‘“A Zone of Indistinction” – A Critique of Giorgio Agamben’s Concept of Biopolitics’, www.thomaslemkeweb.de/engl.%20texte/A%20Zone3.pdf

**Supplementary Readings**
Additional Readings for the Course

Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, University of California Press, 2002

Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault as I imagine him, in *Foucault/Blanchot*, 1987.
(http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/toc/archive.html#5.4)
Noel O'Sullivan, 'Difference and the Concept of the Political in Contemporary Political Philosophy', *Political Studies*, 1997, XLV, 739-754.
Meenakshi Thapan, Living the Body: Embodiment, Womanhood and Identity in Contemporary India, Sage, 2009,
(http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Law/2005/afspa.htm.)