



MICHEL FOUCAULT'S BIO POWER AND HUMAN EXISTENCE: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

This research discusses the idea of bio power, a concept developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault, and how it affects human life. Bio power refers to the ways modern governments and institutions control people, not just through laws, but by managing things like health, education, and even how we think about ourselves. The main problem this study looks at is how bio power reduces individual freedom and shapes our identity, often without us realizing it. This work uses Analytic method to explore the ideas of Foucault and other thinkers to understand how bio power operates and what it means for human beings today. The study finds that bio power has both positive and negative effects: it helps organize society but also limits personal autonomy and leads to hidden control. The work also shows that Foucault's ideas may not fully explain how power works in African or traditional societies. People should become more aware of how power works in everyday life and that societies should encourage critical thinking and resistance to unfair control. This research further submits that, while bio power is a strong tool of modern control, understanding it can help us fight for more freedom and human dignity.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, bio power, human existence, philosophical appraisal.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, power no longer functions only through force or physical domination. Instead, it has taken on more subtle and organized forms that deeply influence how individuals live, think, and understand themselves. "The French philosopher Michel Foucault introduced the concept of bio power to explain how modern institutions such as hospitals, schools, prisons, and governments exercise control not by direct violence, but by regulating life itself."¹ "Through policies, systems, and everyday practices, these institutions manage people's bodies, behaviours, health and identities. This transformation of power, from ruling through fear to organizing and supervising life, raises important questions about human freedom and autonomy."²

The central problem this study addresses is the way bio power silently reduces individual freedom and shapes people's sense of self. Many individuals remain unaware that their lives are being guided and controlled by systems that claim to support them. As a result, personal autonomy maybe lost, and identity may be formed under pressures that are not easily noticed. This study is therefore concerned with the philosophical implications of bio power on human existence. It asks: how can we be really free if the choices we make are already influenced by hidden forces in society? How do people come to understand themselves? This is a serious concern because it affects how we live and understand our own identity as human beings. Despite the growing relevance of bio power in understanding how human life is governed, there remains a lacuna in fully appreciating its



philosophical implications, particularly in non-western contexts where cultural, political, and historical realities differ significantly from the European experiences Foucault examined. There is a need to critically assess how bio power influences subjectivity, freedom, and human existence in diverse societies, and to question whether it enhances or diminishes the dignity and agency of individuals.

The aim of this work is to critically examine Michel Foucault's idea of bio power and its effects on human life. It seeks to explain how bio power functions in society, explore its impact on autonomy and identity, and assess its relevance beyond Western cultures. Although Foucault theories are rooted in Western contexts, this study also considers how they might apply in African societies, where traditional forms of power and cultural values play a significant role.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF BIO POWER

"Michel Foucault (1926–84) coined the term '*biopouvoir*' ('bio power') to describe power as it concerns human life, in particular with regard to the human body on one hand and human populations on the other."¹² The term itself was not much used by Foucault; in fact it appears only in one of the books he published in his lifetime (the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*) and there it is used only a few times within the space of six pages. The term is, however, both memorable and useful. The term also captures an area that was central to Foucault's work on power and knowledge during the 1970s.

Michel Foucault's concept of bio power is a critical component of his philosophical framework, which explores the relationships between power, knowledge, and subjectivity. "Bio power, in Foucault's formulation, refers to the ways in which power operates through the management and regulation of bodies, populations, and life processes."¹³ This concept is central to Foucault's analysis of modernity and the ways in which power shapes our understanding of ourselves and our place within society. However, Foucault first introduced the concept of bio power in his 1976 book, "The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction." In this work, Foucault argued that power is not solely a matter of repression or prohibition, but rather a complex network of relationships that shape our understanding of ourselves and our desires. Bio power, in this context, refers to the ways in which power operates through the creation of norms, standards, and categories that govern our understanding of human life and behavior.

Foucault outlines two major poles of bio power:

"Anatomo-politics of the human body, which focuses on the disciplining of individual bodies through mechanisms like surveillance, training, and correction."¹⁴ This is evident in institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons that produce "docile bodies"—bodies that can be economically productive and politically useful.

"Bio politics of the population, which seeks to manage the biological processes of entire populations—birth rates, disease control, life expectancy, and health conditions—through regulatory mechanisms like public health initiatives, demography, and urban planning."¹⁵ These mechanisms function together to create what Foucault calls bio politics, a form of governance that centres on life itself. Bio power is thus not merely a mode of repression; it is also productive, generating norms, institutions, knowledge systems, and even forms of subjectivity.

One of the key features of bio power is its focus on the management and regulation of populations. "Foucault argued that modern societies are characterized by a shift from a focus on the individual to a focus on the population as a whole."¹⁶ This shift is accompanied by the development of new forms of knowledge and power, including demography, statistics, and epidemiology. These forms of knowledge and power enable governments and other institutions to manage and regulate populations in increasingly detailed and nuanced ways.

Foucault's concept of bio power is also closely tied to his analysis of the concept of "life." In Foucault's view, "life is not simply a biological or natural phenomenon, but rather a complex and



multifaceted concept that is shaped by power relationships and social norms.”¹⁷ Bio power operates through the creation of norms and standards that govern our understanding of human life and behavior, and through the management and regulation of populations. Another key feature of bio power is its focus on the creation of norms and standards that govern our understanding of human life and behavior. “Foucault argued that modern societies are characterized by a proliferation of norms and standards that govern every aspect of human life, from our bodily functions to our emotional experiences.”¹⁸ These norms and standards are created and enforced through a complex network of power relationships, including those between governments, institutions, and individuals.

THE RIGHT OF DEATH AND POWER OVER LIFE

A fundamental shift in modern forms of power, according to Foucault, is the transition from the sovereign’s right to kill to the state’s power to manage life. In earlier eras, the power of a ruler was marked by the right to decide over death-executions and public displays of violence were essential tools of sovereignty. However, in modern times, this power is inverted. The state now primarily seeks to foster life-extending it, improving its quality, and regulating its processes. As Foucault famously states, the right of the sovereign was to take life or let live; the right of modern power is to make live and let die. This means that the sovereign function of killing is subordinated to the bio political function of managing life processes. Yet, this shift does not eliminate death. Instead, death is strategically redistributed. Modern power can let die by allowing marginalized populations-racialized communities, the poor, the disabled-to be exposed to systemic neglect.

In “Society Must Be Defended,” Foucault explains that state racism functions as a justification for this logic. By categorizing certain populations as threats to the health of the whole, the state legitimizes violence and exclusion in the name of protecting life.

Foucault's analysis of the "right of death and power over life" is closely tied to his critique of modernity and the Enlightenment values of reason, progress, and individualism. “He argues that these values have created a society in which individuals are seen as autonomous, rational beings who are capable of making choices and exercising control over their own lives.”¹⁹ However, Foucault contends that this view of individualism is illusory, and that individuals are in fact subject to a range of power relationships and structures that shape their lives and choices. The "right of death and power over life" is one of the key mechanisms through which this power is exercised.

BIO POWER ON INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM

Michel Foucault’s concept of bio power fundamentally challenges traditional notions of individual autonomy. Bio power refers to the mechanisms through which modern states regulate populations through institutions, norms, medical practices, and policies that target life itself like health, birth rate, longevity, and bodily behaviour. It is a form of power that operates not by fostering and managing it. This creates a paradoxical relationship with autonomy: while bio power appears to grant individuals more freedom (e.g., access to healthcare, education, sanitation), it simultaneously subjects them to subtle control. His idea of bio power helps us understand how modern governments and institutions control people’s lives in subtle but powerful ways. Bio power is not the type of power that uses force or violence, instead it works by managing life- things like education, hygiene, and even emotions. It shapes how people live by influencing their choices, behaviours, and even how they see themselves.

At first, it may seem like people today have more freedom than ever before. We can make choices about our health, our careers, and how we live. “But Foucault argues that individuals autonomy in the modern era is increasingly shaped and constrained by systems of knowledge and power that normalize behaviours and define what it means to live a “healthy,” “productive,” or “normal,” life.”²⁰ As a result, we start to act in ways that follow this rules without even realizing it. These norms are internalized, meaning individuals often govern themselves according to standards imposed externally, under the illusion of personal freedom; We believe we are making our own decisions, but in reality, our choices have already been influenced by the expectations of the society.



Thus, autonomy becomes a regulated autonomy- one that aligns with broader societal interests, particularly those of the state and capitalist economy.

For example, public health messages tell us what to eat, how much to exercise, and even how to behave sexually. Schools teach us how to think and behave in socially acceptable ways. Hospitals and doctors tell us what is considered a “healthy” body or mind. “Autonomy then, is not purely a matter of free will but is mediated through institutional discourses and practice that subtly guide individual choices and behaviors.”²¹ We are to understand that the institutions mentioned work together to shape how individuals live. They do not force us, but they guide us through rules, advice, and knowledge. This is how bio power works through soft control, not physical force. This kind of control affects our autonomy. Autonomy means the ability to make decisions for oneself, based on one’s own value and desires. But under the influence of bio power, our autonomy becomes limited. We may think we are acting freely, but we are often acting in ways that society has already trained us to act. For example, a woman may feel she “chooses” to undergo a cosmetic surgery, but her desire may have been shaped by societal pressures about beauty. Similarly, people may feel pressure to be “productive” or “fit,” not necessarily because they want to, but because society has told them these are the right goals. As people become objects of scientific observation and medical categorization, their sense of self becomes enmeshed with expert authority. This erodes traditional self-determination, replacing it with dependence on expert systems that define what is desirable or permissible.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY AND IDENTITY

The construction of subjectivity and identity is a complex and multifaceted process that has been extensively explored in various fields, including philosophy, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. This process involves the creation of a sense of self and identity through the interaction of various factors, including social norms, cultural values, personal experiences, and power relationships.

One of the key theories that have been influential in understanding the construction of subjectivity and identity is the concept of performativity, developed by Judith Butler. According to Butler, “identity is not a fixed or essential aspect of the self, but rather a performance that is repeated and reinforced through social and cultural norms.”²² This performance is not just a matter of individual choice, but is shaped by power relationships and social expectations. The construction of subjectivity and identity is also closely tied to the concept of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. “Intersectionality refers to the way in which multiple forms of oppression, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism, intersect and overlap to create unique experiences of marginalization and exclusion.”²³ This concept highlights the importance of considering the multiple and intersecting factors that shape an individual's sense of self and identity. The role of power relationships in shaping subjectivity and identity is also a key theme in the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault argues that power is not just a matter of coercion or domination, but is also exercised through the creation of norms and standards that shape our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. In other words power create subjectivity. Subjectivity refers to how individuals come to see themselves as particular kinds of people, such as female or male, healthy or sick, normal or abnormal, citizen or criminal. According to Foucault these identities are not natural or fixed. Instead they shaped by social systems, institutions and knowledge. This perspective highlights the importance of considering the ways in which power relationships shape our sense of self and identity.

Bio power plays a major in this process. Through education, medicine, law, religion and even the media, society teaches people how to understand themselves. For example school tell children what it means to be a “good student.” Hospitals tell patients how to be “mentally healthy.” The government tell the citizen how to be “responsible” or “patriotic.” These messages help form our sense of identity. Over time we start to live according to these definitions, even if they limit us. Foucault explains that modern power does not just act on people, it acts through them. That means



individuals are not just controlled from the outside; they also take in the rules and being to control themselves.

LIMITATIONS OF BIO POWER IN NON-WESTERN CONTEXT

Michel Foucault's concept of bio power was primarily developed in relation to western societies, especially within the context of European history and institutions such as hospitals, schools, prison, and the state. As such, applying his theory directly to non-western societies presents certain limitations. These limitations arise due to cultural, historical, political and institutional differences that shape the way power operates in different parts of the world.

One of the majors is that, non-western societies often have different power structures and historical experiences of governance that do not align neatly with Foucault's model. For example, many African, Asian, and Latin American countries experienced colonialism, which imposed foreign systems of control that combined violent domination with administrative regulation. While bio power focuses on the management of life and populations through subtle and disciplinary means, colonial rule often relied on overt violence and racial hierarchies. Thus, the mode of power in such contexts was more brutal and less focused on the "care of life" that Foucault describes.

Furthermore, indigenous knowledge systems and traditional forms of authority in non-western societies do not always fit into the frameworks of modern disciplinary institutions. In many African societies, for example, authority and governance may be tied to kinship structures, spiritual beliefs, or community-based decision-making processes. These do not operate on the same logic of surveillance and nominalization seen in Foucault's analysis of modern western institutions. Therefore, applying bio power without considering local cultural contexts may result in a superficial understanding of how power actually functions.

APPRAISAL OF BIOPOWER ON HUMAN EXISTENCE

Michel Foucault's concept of bio power has transformed how we understand power in modern societies. Rather than viewing power as merely repressive or coercive, Foucault reveals it as productive operating through institutions and systems that manage life, health, and behaviour.

This reconceptualization has serious implications for human existence, both positive and negative.

From our understanding, bio power has contributed significantly to advancements in society, especially in areas such as medicine, education, public health, and governance. These systems powered by knowledge and data, aim to preserve life, prevent diseases, and ensure public order. However, while these developments may appear beneficial, they also bring about subtle forms of control. As individuals we are constantly being observed, measured, and normalized. In a way our lives are shaped before we are even conscious of it.

This raises an important question: Are we truly free? When we conform to societal expectations about how to live, what to wear, how to behave, or even how to think, we may believe we are making our own choices. But in reality, many of these choices have already been influenced by external systems of power and regulation. This challenges the idea of autonomy and self-determination. Power is not only something imposed from above, but something we carry within and exercise upon ourselves. Furthermore, Foucault's idea of subjectivities, the process through which individuals become subjects, made me reflect deeply on how identities are constructed. Who we are is just a personal or spiritual discovery, but a product of historical and institutional forces. Our gender, race, social role, and even desires can be shaped by norms imposed by society. Personally, this realization has made me more conscious of how I understand myself and others, and how power is present even in the most personal aspect of life.

However, some critics argue that Foucault's analysis may be too deterministic. If power is everywhere and in everything, does that leave any room for genuine agency or resistance? While Foucault insists that power always invites resistance, his framework can sometimes appear pessimistic about the human capacity to transcend power structures. I also think it's important to point out that Foucault's theory was largely developed in Western contexts. In many non-western



societies like mine, the operation of power is often mixed with traditional values, religious beliefs, and local customs. Therefore, while Foucault's ideas are useful, they must be applied with caution and cultural sensitivity. Bio power does not manifest the same way everywhere, and this diversity of experience must be acknowledged.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

In evaluating Michel Foucault's concept of bio power, it becomes evident that his contribution to contemporary philosophy and socio-political thought remains both profound and provocative.

"Foucault's idea that power is not only repressive but also productive introduces a new way of understanding how modern societies govern life."²⁴ through bio power, institutions such as governments, medical systems, educational structures, and even families participate in the regulation, control, and optimization of bodies and populations. Bio power is about how governments and institutions manage people's lives. It is not only about punishing people, but about organizing, monitoring, and controlling life, especially things like birth, health, population and behaviour. For example, when the government makes rules about vaccination or population control that is bio power at work.

Foucault's analysis dismantles the illusion that modern society is necessarily freer or more humane. Rather, "he reveals that modernity introduces new forms of subtle domination, often masked by discourses of care, health and development."²⁵ The individual is not merely oppressed from above but is shaped from within, turning power inward in the form of self-regulation, discipline, and normalization.

However, one limitation I noticed in Foucault's work is that it mostly focuses on Western societies. In Africa or other non-western places, power works differently. Culture, religion, and tradition also play big roles in shaping people's lives. So while bio power helps explain a lot, it does not fully capture the African experience unless we adjust it to fit our local context. Despite its abstract and often complex nature, Foucault's notion of bio power opens up necessary conversations about freedom, surveillance, control, and resistance. It challenges us to reconsider the ways we think about governance and human dignity in a time where even the most intimate aspects of life are subject to political control.

In sum, Foucault's bio power invites both scholars and ordinary individuals to be more critically aware of how power operates not just in the halls of government, but in hospitals, schools, homes, and even in our own choices and thought. It forces us to ask difficult but essential questions about what it truly means to be free, and how we might resist the quiet, persistent forces that shape our existence.

In this research, it is clear that Michel Foucault's idea of bio power gives us a new way of understanding how power works in our world today. Unlike the old idea of power as something that comes only from rulers or governments forcing people to obey, bio power shows how power now works in a more hidden and quiet way, through rules, knowledge, and systems that manage how people live. Bio power focuses on the control and regulation of life, especially through health systems, education, population policies, and surveillance. It makes people follow certain behaviours not always through punishment, but by making them believe that those behaviours are normal or necessary. This form of power is everywhere, and it affects us even when we do not notice it. This research has helped to understand how people's identities and lifestyles are shaped by these invisible forces. Even the way we think, speak, and behave is connected to the power structures around us. What we often see as personal choices are sometimes the results of social training and expectations. At the same time, bio power is not only negative, it has helped societies improve healthcare, protect lives, and create order. However, it becomes dangerous when it is used to take away people's freedom or when people are made to follow rules blindly without questioning them. Another important point is that Foucault's ideas, while very useful, mostly reflect what happens in Western societies. In African contexts like Nigeria, we need to think about how tradition, religion,



and culture influence power differently. So, to fully understand bio power in our own environment, we must adapt the theory and apply it with our own realities in mind.

Summarily, Foucault's theory of bio power is a powerful tool for examining modern society. It shows how human life is shaped by structures we cannot always see. But it also reminds us to ask questions, to reflect, and to resist control when it becomes harmful. As we continue to live in a world where technology and systems monitor almost everything we do, understanding bio power helps us protect our dignity, freedom, and identity.

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