Engaging Foucault's Biopolitics:

Implications for a Materialist Intersectional Politics of Disability

My objective in this paper is to conduct a close comparative reading of two moments where Foucault extensively discusses biopolitics: Lecture 11 from *Society Must be Defended* (*SMBD*) (Foucault, 2003) and Chapter 5 of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (*HS1*) (Foucault, 2006). Specifically, I aim to demonstrate that biopolitics already encompasses, in substantive if incipient form, more recent concepts critically developed from it, such as necropolitics, zoopolitics, and, notably, Jasbir Puar's "right to maim," which will be my primary focus. While it is not my intention to diminish the theoretical and political achievements of these significant contributions, I argue that biopolitics warrants careful exegetical attention prior to corrective modifications, to better unlock its political and philosophical implications.

Foucault's work has been widely misunderstood or dismissed within feminist philosophy, philosophy of disability, and feminist philosophy of disability, as Shelley Tremain (2005, 2015, 2017) has masterfully demonstrated. Building on this foundation, I highlight the undertheorization of Foucault in feminist disability theory that conspicuously operates with Foucauldian frameworks, centrally employing key conceptual apparatuses, yet glossing over them. Such favorable readings often treat Foucault's conceptual tools as important and necessary, though insufficient for adequately explaining certain significant or contemporary processes. Framed this way, constructs like biopolitics seem to require intervention, especially for utilization in domains Foucault may not have explicitly addressed. Call this a *prosthetic approach*, as it seeks to rehabilitate and correct, compensating for perceived deficiencies to

make biopolitics march upright toward a normative purpose. Another concomitant tendency is to use biopolitics mainly as a springboard, often without substantial engagement with primary texts. In both cases, biopolitics is simultaneously overused and undertheorized, its richness and potential underexplored, including its implications for advancing a materialist intersectional feminist politics of disability.

To examine these implications without resorting to a prosthetic approach, I adopt a reading methodology modeled on Foucault's in "What is Enlightenment?" (1997, pp. 303-319) and "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1998, pp.369-391). In his critically productive encounters with Kant and Nietzsche, Foucault "utilize[s]" and "deform[s]" their concepts, making them "groan and protest" (Foucault, 1980, pp. 53-54)—but only after a meticulous exegetical process. Foucault's approach to the uses of his own work similarly eschews authorial intentionality for practical relevance. Foucault wrote to be useful, welcoming various uses of his work in different contexts, with interpretations he did not necessarily intend, as he did not view himself as "the author of the work" (Foucault, 2024, p.153). This broadly characterizes many contemporary uses of Foucault. However, Foucault's irreverence toward intentionality was firmly anchored in a practice of rigorous attention to primary texts. This irreverent reverence grounds my methodology.

Strikingly positioned as the final lecture in *SMBD* and the last chapter in *HS1*, Foucault's pivotal discussions of biopolitics punctuate these texts generatively. Though tailored to unfurl diverging theoretical projects, the two iterations of biopolitics advance similar overall arguments. Yet, their subtle differences—shifts in focus, additions, and omissions—serve to both complicate and complement one another, substantially enriching the understanding of

biopolitics. For example, the reversal of the logical operator in the two formulations of the right over life and death, from disjunction to conjunction (take life *or* let live / make live *and* let die), observed throughout in *SMBD* but dropped in *HS1*, provokes philosophically intriguing questions about the exact conceptual relationship (negation, reversal, opposition, etc.) between the two interpenetrating formulas. Similarly, the extended discussion of population in *SMBD*, alongside the emphasis on biopolitics' central role in capitalism in *HS1*, incites materialist analyses and thought-provoking pathways into Foucault's oeuvre, revealing the astounding level of theoretical consistency throughout.

      In what follows, I begin by reading the two iterations of biopolitics side by side to distill their conceptual subtleties. Drawing on the fertile registers of analysis prompted by this reading, I briefly argue that biopolitics is always already a zoobionecropolitics of capitalist coloniality, primarily with reference to Foucault's notion of 'racism against the abnormal.' I then turn to Jasbir Puar's (2017) use of biopolitics in *The Right to Maim* and examine in some detail the concepts Puar derives from it, with particular focus on the distinction between the biopolitics of disability and the biopolitics of debility. This distinction, I argue, reproduces the ontological structure of the earlier, much-critiqued disability/impairment divide that Puar aims to deflate. I conclude by considering the implications of a nuanced understanding of biopolitics for this philosophically and politically compelling problem specifically and for advancing a materialist intersectional disability politics more broadly.

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