

# Liberal War and Foucaultian Metaphysics

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Book : *The Liberal Way of War: Killing to Make Life Live*

Author : Michael Dillon and Julian Reid

Publisher : Routledge; Oxon, UK and New York, U.S.A.; 2009, 196 pages

## Introduction

This book, by the two leading Foucaultian theorists of international security, makes compulsory reading by virtue of the claim it stakes in developing a Foucaultian, biopolitical, critique of the ' liberal way of war '. There is little doubt that the question of the relationship between Foucault's conception of biopolitics and an understanding of the global politics of peace and war today, which they seek to explore, is of tremendous importance. It for these reasons that is all the more disappointing that the authors make little attempt to preach to the unconverted. In fact, the book makes little attempt even to engage with work in the discipline, beyond that of the authors themselves ( the index, alone, has them referring to themselves on 40 occasions over 150 pages ) In its self-regarding approach, the authors render their problematic opaque through the over-use of jargonised concepts such as ' the emergency of emergence ', ' being-in-formation ' and ' the informationalization of life ' - and through their depoliticized and essentializing methodology, which unfortunately, and ironically, seems to be the compulsory fashion among self-proclaimed ' developers ' of Foucaultian approaches today.

The authors start with the claim that they are updating Foucault for the global age, developing his analytical framework of biopolitics to theorise the ' liberal way of war '. They do this: ' by starting with the question of what happens to power and politics

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when it takes species life as its referent object, and then asking what happens to that biopolitical regime of power thus formed when the life which it takes as its referent object is informationalized and construed as contingently adaptive emergence, thereby continuously becoming-dangerous to itself' ( p.149 ). Unfortunately, this starting question already contains all the assumptions which undermine Dillon and Reid's work in this area and serves to close down the possibilities for theorising the world we live in biopolitically, preventing them from moving beyond a repetitive and jargonized set of assertions, with some descriptive purchase but little that enables us to open up the problematic of ways of rule and war to critical theorizing.

### Reifying Liberal War

This is a book about the ' liberal way of war '. But the liberal referred to in the title remains under theorized. On several occasions the authors highlight the distinction between the liberal way of war and the general framing of war in the modern liberal era as a geo-strategic contestation, taking the territorial state as its referent object. For Dillon and Reid, ' liberalism never fitted this model of modern politics and the modern problematization of war very well ' ( p.83 ). They therefore seek to define liberalism and the liberal way of war as distinct from war in the liberal era. The liberal way of war refers not to real wars and conflicts but to an abstract model of conflict, defined as a desire to ' remove war from the life of humanity ' which ' derives from the way in which liberalism takes the life of the species as its referent object of politics

biopolitics ' ( p.84 ) In this framing, the liberal nature of war very much depends on the self-description of the conflict by its proponents: these range from Gladstone's occupation of Egypt in the cause of ' suffering humanity ', to US liberal ideological constructions of the cause of ' freedom ' in the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union up to Bush and Blair's war on Iraq in the cause of humanity ( p.6 ). As the authors state, of course, wars may be fought on other grounds than universal humanity: ' liberal states may...also act as geopolitical sovereign actors as well...and may also have geopolitical motives for the wars they wage ' ( p.84 )

It is clear from the beginning that the distinctiveness of ' the liberal way of war ' which they seek to explore cannot be more than a fool's quest. They assert that they will critically uncover the paradox of liberal war: why it is that Realist or geostrategic

war accepts the necessity of war but attempts to limit it, while liberals wish to end war but, to do so, are willing to fight unlimited wars. Yet, they admit that this starting point is already an ideological dead end – the wars of the twentieth century give the lie to the idea that there is some distinction between ‘ unending crusades ’ and ‘ limited jousts between rationally calculative political subjects ’: war has its own dynamic ( p.7 ). Nevertheless, Dillon and Reid press on and seek to go beyond a Schmittian critique to ground this paradox in the biopolitical ‘ driver ’ of the liberal way of rule – biopolitics: wars waged under the banner of the human ( against humans ) are liberal and, allegedly biopolitical, as human life is declared to be the referent in need of being secured. These wars are alleged to be fought differently to geo-political wars for territory, because the ‘ drivers ’ of war are not territorialized interests but the biopolitical framings of the needs of the human, how human life can and should be lived. Inevitably there are insuperable methodological hurdles to this Sisyphean task. Already, there occurs the first fundamental aporia: how do we tell the difference between a liberal and non-liberal war? There appears to be no way of preventing the category of liberal war from becoming a lifeless and descriptive one: wars are liberal and fought biopolitically only if we are told that these are the motives by those fighting them.

This separation of liberal ways of war from territorialised framings of geostrategic contestation makes little sense as a framework for understanding either liberal rule or liberal ways of war. In fact, in defining liberal war in this way the connection between liberal rule and war is entirely severed. ‘ Liberal war may on occasions also be geopolitical; which is to say that war may be simultaneously geopolitical as well as biopolitically driven since the imperatives behind war are never uniform or simple; but what distinguishes the liberal way of war as liberal are the biopolitical imperatives which have consistently driven its violent peace-making. ’ ( p.85 ) Liberal rule has also resulted in wars for territory or in defence of territories; nevertheless, a story, of course, could have been told about how views of the human fitted those of struggles to command territory. This is acknowledged, but sits uneasily with the narrow view of liberal war for species life. If the racial doctrines of European empires, up to and including the genocidal racism of the Nazi regime, were also biopolitically driven and the authors, indeed, write of race as part of the ‘ liberal biopolitics of the

seventeenth century ' then it seems difficult to separate a liberal way of war from allegedly ' non-liberal ' wars of territorial control.

It seems clear that Dillon and Reid do not seek to take the logical step of arguing that the view of the human reflects, and is reflected by, how the human is ruled and how wars are both thought and fought. Why? Because for them there is something suprahistorically unique and distinct about the liberal way of war: a distinctly liberal view which foregrounds the human as the referent of security. Therefore, a second aporia arises: on what basis is this specifically ' liberal ' ? It would appear that every form of rule and of war has at least an implicit view of the ' human ' and through this view of the human the form of rule and the way of war are rationalized. There is not and cannot be anything specifically ' liberal ' about this. The humanity in need of securing, through war on other humans, could be formed by Alexander the Great's stoic cosmopolitan vision, or could be ' God's chosen people ', ' the master race ', or ' the gains of the proletarian revolution ': there is little doubt that beliefs of what the human is, or could become, were a vital part of many non-Liberal dispositifs the discourses and practices - of both rule and war.

The key starting assumption, that the liberal way of war can be isolated from any other - and its alleged specific form, of ' unending violence ', explained by its referent of the human - appears to be a particularly unproductive one. At the level of abstraction at which Dillon and Reid choose to work, there is very little here that would help to distinguish between a liberal and a non-liberal way of war ( the asserted purpose of the book ) Of course, what matters is what this view of the human is. Here Dillon and Reid appear to recognise the limits of their essentializing approach:

...just as the liberal way of rule is constantly adapting and changing so also is the liberal way of war. There is, in that sense, no one liberal way of rule or one liberal way of war. But there is a fundamental continuity which justifies us referring to the singular...the fact that each takes the properties of species existence as its referent object...finding its expression historically in many changing formations of rule according...to the changing exigencies and understanding of species being... ( p.84 )

Rather than understand our forms of post-political rule and post-territorial war today on their own terms and then consider to what extent this way of rule and war can be

theorized, and to what extent, if any, Foucault's conception of biopolitics may be of assistance, Dillon and Reid start out from the assumption that we live in a liberal world of rule and war and that therefore both can be critiqued through the framework developed by Foucault in his engagement with understanding the rise and transformation of liberal forms of rule. In transposing Foucault's critical engagement with liberal ways of rule to an understanding of liberal ways of war, Dillon and Reid take a body of historical work about the changing political nature of liberal rule and transpose it into an essentialised and under theorized understanding of liberal war. This is no mean feat; how they manage this accomplishment will be discussed in the next two sections.

### Genealogy

Dillon and Reid claim that they are developing the work of Foucault and extending his critical conception of biopolitics to the liberal way of war. However, whereas Foucault attempted to precisely ground his conceptual categories, giving biopolitics a substantial theoretical, political and historical substance, the authors of this book seek to denude the conception of biopolitics of theory, politics and history. Instead, biopolitics becomes merely a technical expression or way of viewing the world which takes humanity as its starting point. To assert the global nature of humanity as a security referent, as Julian Huxley, the first Director-General of UNESCO, does, in 1963, is, therefore, for Dillon and Reid, the moment when Foucault's biopolitics begins 'to go global' (p.51)

The chapters devoted to the impact of the sciences - of the transformation of biology, of cybernetics, complexity and the digital revolution, and of the revolution in military affairs - highlight the deterministic and technicized frameworks through which biopolitics is grasped, in the terminology of Dillon and Reid, as the 'informationalization of life'. We are told that the 'reduction of species existence to information and code become central to the contemporary expression of liberal biopolitics' (p.56) providing global liberal governance with a programmatic agenda of transforming life itself. The reduction of the human to the biohuman (to information and code) is understood as a reflection of the developments of science and technology, enabling a new understanding of what life is and therefore of how it should be

governed and how it can be secured through war. While they argue that the focus on new techno-scientific advances in war-fighting risk the danger that they ' become technician if they do not also take into account the deep correlation which also obtains between forms of rule and forms of war ' ( p.121 ) they miss the technicized way in which they themselves correlate the advances in the science of the human with forms of rule and war.

Dillon and Reid argue that: ' Unless we at least sketch some of the modern genealogy of this progressive informationalization of life, however, these developments would appear, in the ways their champions regularly present them, as reified accounts of life rather than socio-technical realizations of discoveries and developments whose life histories not only could have been different but are currently still in process as well. ' ( p.59 ) They seek to present a picture of the ' human in-formation ' ; formed through the developments of the science of what it means to be a human, which ' drives ' the biopoliticized nature of liberal rule and liberal war.

In this way, Dillon and Reid, provide a genealogy of the ' informationalization of life ' which is highly deterministic. Here, they merely reproduce the discourses of the military and policy elites which they study, writing the human and politics out of the picture as the developing understanding of the biohuman is held to dictate the liberal way of rule and way of war. How else can they write of ' the biopolitical drivers historically at work in liberal politics ' ( p.53 ) or how ' the properties of species life will begin to dictate the terms under which the authority and legitimacy of states will also be expressed, and state power exercised locally and globally ' ( p.53 )?

If anything, this is the exact opposite of Foucault's approach to genealogy; implacably hostile to the idealism of inner ' logics ' of history or to its teleological ' drivers '.<sup>1</sup> For Foucault, the ' biopolitics ' of Dillon and Reid could only be a metaphysics of the realization of what they essentialize as ' the liberal way or war '. As we shall consider in the next section, it would appear that these ' Foucaultians ' have little time for Foucault either.

### Biopolitics

Dillon and Reid correctly wish to highlight how, in modern conceptions of rule and war, the human is reduced to the biohuman ( i.e., how the subject of rights is reduced

to the object of regulatory rule ). As we have seen, this move is seen to be suprahistorically ‘ driven ’ by the deep imbrication of liberal rule within the aim of promoting species or human life. For the authors, ‘ the biopolitical is an order of politics and power which, taking species existence as its referent object, circumscribes the discourse of what it is to be a living being to the policing, auditing and augmentation of species properties ’ ( p.29 ). This reduction of the human to the ‘ biohuman ’ liberalism’s ‘ referent object of war and rule ’ ( p.31 ) is described as facilitated by the ‘ informationalization of life ’, with these implications:

It is precisely this move which marks the significance not only of the digital or molecular revolutions of the twentieth century but of the confluence of these two revolutions, to the common effect of informationalizing life and order...a move which does not so much penetrate the mysteries of life as expose it further to a logic of relentless manipulation and re-formation. ( p.21 )

Apparently, according to Dillon and Reid, Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics needs updating as ‘ the understanding of what it is to be a living thing has changed, and so also have the very life experiences of national and global populations, indeed of the species as [a] whole, since Foucault first analysed the introduction, during the course of the eighteenth century, of what he called the ‘ birth of biopolitics ’ ’ ( p.36 ) This trope is repeated on several occasions ( for example, pp.41 and 47 ) most remarkably, they state, further on the same page:

...we are obliged to theorize with Foucault and beyond Foucault. For Foucault only initiated the problematic of the biopolitization of both rule and war as he interrogated the early advent of modern politics, security and war in the revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. ( p.36 )

The forcing of Foucault’s conception of biopolitics into a framework of liberalism per se and alleging that Foucault only interrogated biopolitics at the ‘ early advent of modern politics ’ in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is disingenuous, as is the assertion that Foucault saw the ‘ birth of biopolitics ’ at this time. The book that Dillon and Reid refer to - *The Birth of Biopolitics*<sup>2</sup> - deals not with the eighteenth century but with post-war Germany and Foucault is keen to locate ‘ the birth of biopolitics ’ as presupposing the governmental regime of liberalism not as codeterminous with it; for Foucault: ‘ Only when we know what this governmental

regime called liberalism was, will be able to grasp what biopolitics is.<sup>3</sup>

Foucault, in three lecture series at Collège de France (1975-79), worked through a powerful analysis of liberalism as a series of historically specific, contested and overlapping governmental rationalities, or forms of rule.<sup>4</sup> Crudely put, he summarised three stages in the relationship of government to governed, or the sovereign to society. Firstly, the sovereign ruled over society as his private fiefdom. Secondly, the sovereign ruled no longer over but through society. The liberal sovereign could not make society free; the freedoms of society were the precondition for the liberal framing of rights and the market: under liberalism the sovereign - as representative of the collective interest, as a 'totalizing unity' - could only intervene in the interests of securing the reproduction of the freedoms of the 'non-totalizable multiplicity of economic subjects of interests'.<sup>5</sup> Thirdly, this liberal problematic was subject to a 'number of shifts, transformations and inversions in traditional liberal doctrine', which are the subject of the final series of lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*,<sup>6</sup> which Foucault locates, not in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, but in the crisis of political legitimacy of the post-war West German state, a crisis which could be understood to have become more generalized in what could be called late modernity.

In contradistinction to the scientific and technical determinism of Dillon and Reid, Foucault builds up a powerful analysis of the implications of reducing the human to the 'biohuman'. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault describes how the sovereign becomes totally immersed in society, where there is the governed but there is no sovereign capable of directing or controlling society; here, the sovereign 'is completely discharged of a duty...of directing...the interest of society'.<sup>7</sup> Foucault highlights the similarities between biopolitics and neoliberal institutionalism (of Douglass North, for example) where politics is reduced to the administration of difference - civil society to enabling and facilitating both states and individuals to adapt to their external circumstances. This is no longer the discourse of 'too much or too little' intervention, but of prevention through institutional (organizational) change to remove the blockages to adapting to the external needs of security.

Foucault makes the point that the biopolitical framing of power removes the classical limits of liberal government at the same time as making the sovereign appear redundant. In a biopolitical framing, the possibility of manipulating individual



behaviour - on the basis of the individual being ' the subject of choices which are both irreducible and non-transferable ' - facilitated the transformation of the citizen subject into the object of policy. This manipulative capacity was indirect, through intervention at the level of institutional frameworks ( both formal and informal ) and meant that there was no longer a division between the state and the market or the public and private spheres ( or, implicitly, between the domestic and the international ) ' any rational conduct or behaviour whatsoever ' became the possible object of analysis and thereby of government policy-making.<sup>9</sup> A biopolitical framing knows no boundaries and is not shaped in political or juridical terms but in terms of the regulatory framework which enables individuals ( or states ) to make the right adaptive choices. Rather than the laissez-faire of liberalism there is rather ' permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention ' and the problematization of the autonomous subject.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Descriptively, Dillon and Reid occasionally capture the implications of the biopolitical projections of Western forms of governance, especially when they move away from the focus on scientific and technological advances and let the policy practices of global governmentality speak for themselves, which they do in the concluding chapter especially. In fact, the most useful concept in the book is not the jargonized terms which are invented by the authors but that of the policy goal of ' resilience '. The goal of creating resilient states and societies, sums up the biopolitics of today, where there is no imaginary global sovereign directing or controlling society - democratizing, developing or securing the Other - rather there is a focus on the Other democratizing, developing and securing itself under the imperative of becoming safe for itself and for others. Here the ' war of the biohuman on the human ' becomes manifest, the autonomy of the Other is a threat to itself and to others, regulatory intervention is necessary to ensure that the formal blockages ( of state elites ) and informal blockages ( of uncivil society ) are removed to ensure that non-Western states and societies can secure themselves. The task of the ' biohuman ' is to adapt and respond to external changes - whether in the global economy or in relation to global warming, anything more ( aspirations for control and autonomy, for example ) is held to be a threat to this need for adaptation and resilience.

In their concluding chapter, Dillon and Reid assert that their argument is ‘ designed to raise questions about the nature of the modern account of the political as such ’ ( p.149 ) However, the irony is that they provide less of a political critique of the shift from the human to the biohuman than that already provided in Foucault’s *Birth of Biopolitics*. They suggest the dumb and depoliticized resistance of the ‘ good for nothing ’ ( pp.153-6 ) to the seemingly overwhelming power of the biopolitical ordering of the globe. Foucault, in recognizing the contingency and contested nature of every liberal form of rule ( and war ) , points the way much more easily to the politics of taking the side of autonomy: the side of the human against the biohuman. Dillon and Reid demonstrate the poverty of Foucaultian theorizing despite the political and critical avenues opened up by Foucault’s work on biopolitics; rather than ‘ going beyond ’ Foucault it would appear that there is still a substantial amount of catching up to do.

#### Notes

- 1 See, for example, Michel Foucault, ‘ Nietzsche, Genealogy, History ’, in D. F. Bouchard ( ed. ) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* ( Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977 ) pp.139-164.
- 2 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* ( Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008 )
- 3 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p.22 ( emphasis added )
- 4 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p.313.
- 5 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p.282.
- 6 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p.118.
- 7 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p.281.
- 8 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p.272.
- 9 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p.269.
- 10 Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, p.132.