

# The Biopolitical Turn, Marxism and the Radicalization of Social Theory

Jing Wang<sup>1</sup>, Yu Lei<sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Philosophy, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China

<sup>2</sup>College of Marxism, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China

## Email address:

lyndon@smail.nju.edu.cn (Yu Lei)

\*Corresponding author

## To cite this article:

Jing Wang, Yu Lei. The Biopolitical Turn, Marxism and the Radicalization of Social Theory. *Humanities and Social Sciences*.

Vol. 10, No. 1, 2022, pp. 38-47. doi: 10.11648/j.hss.20221001.15

**Received:** October 31, 2021; **Accepted:** November 23, 2021; **Published:** February 19, 2022

---

**Abstract:** In recent years, the concept of biopolitics has gained remarkable acceptance in the social sciences and humanities. The study of biopolitics has been developed in a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy, economics, aesthetics, law, history, and biomedicine, which gives biopolitics a broad interdisciplinary orientation. It has resulted in a general biopolitical turn in the social sciences and humanities. It becomes an urgent and necessary task that how to identify this turn. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to grasp the basic threads, the main methods, the essential contents and the political effects of the biopolitics turn. It is worth noting that only by placing the biopolitics in the context of social-critical theory can we truly gain insight into its inner meaning. In this regard, it must be dissected in terms of Marxist methodology in order to grasp its connotation and political position, rather than accepting the premise of the biopolitics without exception. It argues that the biopolitical turn has reversed the path of traditional political research, defined a new type of political horizon, and put the conditions of measuring knowledge into the study of political context and even the whole humanities and social sciences. The conclusions are as follows: first, the radical social theory based on the “biopolitical turn” provides a new possibility for political imagination of the left. Its pan-politicized preference, however, challenges the theoretical commitments put forward by the left and their abilities to deliver. Second, in this movement, the Marxist critique of capitalism becomes an intrinsic motivation for biopolitical theory, while at the same time Marxism becomes a tradition that is constantly attempted to be transcended and replaced in the new conditions of the times. Third, in the competition for the right to interpret Marx, and in the competition between biopolitical theories, biopolitics increasingly exhausts its most central critical power against capitalism in a theoretical boom, and eventually dwindles into a resource that specific disciplines compete to appropriate.

**Keywords:** The Biopolitical Turn, Social Theory, Knowledge, Marxism

---

## 1. Introduction

“Biopolitical Turn” does not simply mean that biopolitics has become a popular topic. Like numerous trends of thought in western society, the real implication of the biopolitical turn is that it has changed the traditional social and historical epistemology and its methodology. The direct goal of this theoretical trend is to reconstruct the current political standpoints, challenge the traditional cognitive narratives, and open up new workable paths. The biopolitical turn has had a considerable effect on politics, philosophy and the entire field of humanities and social sciences, and promoted the

radicalization of the whole social theory. At the same time, it inherently contains new pluralistic political demands. The purpose of this paper is to grasp the overall dynamics and logic of the “biopolitical turn” in general, to measure its intellectual implication, and to examine its effect on thought and theory from a Marxist perspective.

## 2. The Logic and Implication of the “Biopolitical Turn”

The “biopolitical turn” was inspired by French and Italian philosophers in the context of the turbulent twentieth century

European society. At the very start, the term biopolitics was shrouded in secrecy for it was ill-informed. Though Foucault was not the first philosopher to employ the term “biopolitical turn”, it is through his interpretation of the event that biopolitical turn entered the philosophical discourse and gained its unique connotation. Foucault’s [13] first mention of biopolitics appears in *The willing to power* in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Early interpretations of Foucault’s text argue that the sex is a trouble in the Victorian era and the remarkable effect of the concept of power on Freudianism and Marxism, in which the discussion of biopolitics is “abnormal”. It is due to the popularity of French theory in American academia -in which Foucault plays a particularly important role- that this “abnormal” is taken serious again.

Feminist Donna Haraway’s “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies” [19], published in 1989, played a renowned role in classifying biopolitics as a core category of postmodernism. However, the ultimate formation of the drift of biopolitical turn was predominantly attributed to the highly controversial interpretation of Foucault by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben [1] in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. It goes without saying that it was a hard-worn discovery for Agamben that makes biopolitics reach an unprecedented height. Actually, it was only then that Foucault’s long-sleeping text on biopolitics was reactivated in its current popular form. In the following year, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s [20] critique of Agamben’s biopolitics in *Empire* opened an alternative explanation of Foucault’s biopolitics, which also had an exceedingly contentious effect. Consequently, there was considerable evidence suggesting that biopolitics became prosperous from the spheres of philosophy and political science to the fields of humanities and society, such as anthropology, geography, sociology, law, ethics, and art. It is not until then that the untapped potential of biopolitics could be drastically realized.

The meaning of biopolitics can be derived from the correlation between “bios” (life) and “politics”. As a result of the biopolitical turn, the prefix “bio” was added to traditional disciplines, creating new disciplines such as biomedicine, bioculture, biocapital, bioeconomy, bioethics, bioscience, and biovalue. As a matter of fact, it seems to be a popular phenomenon to reinterpret already existing scientific impulses from the perspective of biopolitics. The biopolitical turn can thus be compared to the “cultural turn” of the 1990s, when everything could be explained by “culture”. A few scholars, hence, emphasize a critical distance between biopolitical interpretations and reality, arguing that it does not take any notice of historical and cultural contexts. In any case, however, biopolitics and its effect on the history of thought have already gone beyond the interpretations of Foucault, Agamben and Negri, and crossed the boundary of the disciplines at the same time, thus making basic new creative links. Admittedly, biopolitics has become the landmark that a multitude of disciplines cannot get around when they examine this problem and reflect on their discipline.

In the process of theoretical change of the “biopolitical turn”, Foucault is of conspicuous significance. It is

emphasized that Foucault as the starting point of the theoretical turn is not due to the respect for the realities. However, it manifests that he is of momentousness to get the gist of the logic of the whole biopolitical turn. In this course, Foucault’s study of biopolitics has gone beyond the traditional study of politics and achieved its unique connotation. As the later empirical facts exhibit, the reason why biopolitics has become a gigantic trend of thought today lies in the fragility and instability of the boundary between “life” and “politics”. It is the fuzziness and ambiguity of this boundary that sparked off the formation of two diametrically opposite schools of interpretation concerning the concept of biopolitics. Among them, the naturalistic interpretation holds that life is the background of politics, and this school of thought employs life to explain political behavior and action; the political interpretation line, on the contrary, believes that politics is higher than life and transcends natural existence.

Nancy assumes that “the emergence of the concept of biopolitics marks a double negation.” [35] In Foucault’s apprehension, life is neither the basis nor the object of politics. On the contrary, life provides a boundary for politics, which is natural, established, and can be artificially changed. It is obvious that Foucault’s biopolitics indubitably marks the break of the political order. “[T]his was nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques.” [13] “Life” has become not only an independent, objective and measurable component, but also a collective reality. It can be separated from the particularity of specific life and individual experience in epistemology and practice. As Lemke [24] points out, for Foucault, adding the prefix bio to politics is not a random extension, but an interruption of traditional political thought. “It does not produce an extension of politics but rather transforms its core, in that it reformulates concepts of political sovereignty and subjugates them to new forms of political knowledge.” [24]

Through the narrative process of “biopolitical turn”, Foucault is finally placed in the pioneering and central position of his epistemological resources. It is not for he has opened up a new contemporary realm of vision for the study of biopolitical issues, but provided a new imagination of knowledge as a political sense. In a larger context, Foucault’s radical theory finds a novel way for the left to escape the failure of the French student movement May 1968. Due to the lack of a stable political premise, the essence of politics lies in the fact that anti-capitalist cultural rebellion began to become a mere formality. The search for this new way of biopolitics is a rebellion against economic determinism with the rise of structuralism, and the determination of capitalism based on the political demands of anti- capitalism. This novel trajectory of biopolitics not only confirms Marx’s fallibility, but also distances itself from Marx, and invariably puts itself in a position to surpass Marx.

The deeper argument that Foucault makes in his writing on the “biopolitical turn” holds that, theoretically and logically, totality is the promoter of oppression and standardization.

Thus, Foucault agrees with Horkheimer and Adorno in this respect. Foucault, who is loyal to Nietzsche, is merciless in his critique of radical historicism and thus breaks away from Horkheimer and Adorno to some extent, as the latter still claim the autonomous subjectivity as historical heritage and thus retain the intention of liberation. Conversely, Foucault's viewpoint of social standardization and an omnipresent power makes him swing back and forth between all-encompassing institutionalization and meaningless resistance. His contradiction is that he retains the demand for liberation (form) yet negates the specific plan (content). Naturally, it is in this sense that Foucault's biopolitics serves as a touchstone and provides theoretical resources and indispensable references for his later successors including Agamben, Negri, and Hart.

### 3. Knowledge, Political Imagination and the Radicalization of Social Theory

A host of available studies have clarified that biopolitics has generated attention for the humanities and social sciences. The central task of this paper is to measure the significance of knowledge and political potential of the "biopolitical turn" by analyzing radical trends of thought. In this sense, the "biopolitical turn" is not a single political reconstruction of discipline, but a grand paradigm shift of knowledge. This movement of knowledge not only provides meta-theoretical innovation in theory, but also has a strong political imagination. Foucault, Agamben and others do not directly promote the movement, they are actually at the center of the movement, and provide it with core theoretical and political resources, thus strikingly affecting the movement in a practical way.

Ever since it was elucidated by Foucault, biopolitics has formed a kind of discourse competition in practical effect. According to the unanimous critique of Foucault on the theme of biopolitics, Agamben, Negri and Hart attempting to surpass Foucault in the sense of fighting for the right of biopolitical interpretation. Thus, with Foucault's initial groundbreaking interpretation of biopolitics as the basic narrative structure, one may more clearly see the absorption and transcendence of Foucault by Agamben, Negri and Hart.

Throughout his life, Foucault examines the history of modernity, mainly focusing on two variables: power-knowledge and subject-truth. He consequently presents his argument on biopolitics according to three statements about its use. First, biopolitics is a strategy that aims to alter the sovereign power. Foucault supposes that sovereign power has evolved into two forms since the 17th century: one is discipline power, which takes the individual body as the object; the other is biopolitics, which takes the collective population as the object. This change demonstrates that the focus of power has shifted from the power to order death, which is characterized by sovereign power, to the power to regulate and manage life. As Foucault points out, "But this formidable power of death now presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a far-reaching impact on life, that endeavors

to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations." [13] Second, biopolitics is a kind of social rationality (governmentality). Foucault reasons that governmentality is not a substitute for sovereign power and discipline, but rather that the two can coexist. Foucault envisions that biopolitics can in some way free people from these powers and disciplines. Foucault's introduction of the role of economy in political practice offers an explanation of the essence of governmentality. At this point, the law is superseded by "strategy". The analysis of liberalism fully illustrates the essence of Foucault's art of governmentality. Liberalism is based on freedom, which is also limited by restriction, control, and security. Finally, biopolitics takes racism as a strategy to eliminate economic surplus. For Foucault, racism not only includes violence against certain racial or ethnic groups, but also encompasses the murdering by the state of its own people. In other words, racism transforms a political relationship into a biological one and makes it a threat to life. In essence, Foucault's biopolitics embodies the connection between political interests, economic incentives and the material world that individuals live in and depend on. Foucault's biopolitics combines these three factors to describe a complex network under the condition of capitalism. This system is regulated and controlled by power.

After discussing the three main applications of Foucault's biopolitics, it is important to mention his historical epistemology and its implication on knowledge. Foucault [17] established his fundamental historical epistemological narrative throughout his doctoral thesis *History of Madness*, in which he expresses a point of view that influenced all his later thinking: society is based on exclusiveness. He dismantled society by dealing with the problem of "madness". The establishment of society was a history of creating differences and internal conflicts. It echoed the importance of what Pierre Bourdieu [6] called "social distinction". People focused on Foucault's discussion of madness, sex, disease, and other issues, while neglecting the primary assumptions of Foucault's discussion. These basic hypotheses, according to Foucault [16], were the epistemes which used to pinpoint the theory in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [15]. Foucault inherited his teacher Canguilhem's "norm" and applied Levi Strauss's [26] belief that the humanities were designed to dispel people in *The Savage Mind*. Foucault hid himself in the popular academic discourses with multifarious features such as archaeology and genealogy, and took this insight as the integral methodology, and expounded his historical epistemology in the same way as Althusser [5]. Foucault's methodology not only had an effect on knowledge, but also deeply influenced the political imagination.

Although Foucault's work is the cornerstone of contemporary debate, no text has done more in promoting the spread of the biopolitical turn than Agamben's series of "Homo Sacer". In this respect, it is not so much the "Homo Sacer" which foretells the political climate after 9/11. As Agamben, with his absolute acuity, captures the hidden fulcrum of the western political system. Agamben attempts to

surpass Foucault with a political theological paradigm. He associates Foucault's critique of national racism with recent phenomena such as the war on terrorism. For his part, biopolitical reasoning plays a role not only in totalitarian states, but also in so-called liberal and democratic societies. The suspension of life is legalized by the exceptional state, which is the main function of sovereignty. Agamben asserts that "bare life" can be classified into two separate categories, namely the biological function and political existence. He maintains that the composition of sovereign power requires the establishment of a biopolitical organization, and the institutionalization of law is closely related to the exposure of bare life. In this sense, he turns Foucault's biopolitics into "death politics".

Foucault's description of the biopower led to the replacement and degradation of the form of sovereignty, which was clearly put at the core of biopower and reversed by Agamben's narratives in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* [1] and *State of Exception* [2]. Naturally, for Agamben, there is no difference between sovereignty and biopower, since in his view, the western political tradition is biopolitical from the very beginning. Western politics is based on a highly unusual form of connection, which Agamben describes as an exception, a ban or an inclusive exclusion. Agamben holds the view that Foucault's biopower and sovereign power are still vague. He figures that the inclusion of life in the political scope forms the original, even hidden, core of sovereign power. "It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception." [1] As a result, Agamben tries to complete the "revision" of Foucault's biopolitics in the *Homo Sacer*. With sovereignty and "bare life" as the core of biopolitics, Agamben has had a significant impact on promoting the "biopolitical turn", peculiarly in line with the tense global political atmosphere after 9 / 11.

Agamben's biopolitics, however, has been surprisingly criticized in two core aspects. First, Agamben puts sovereignty at the center of biopolitics, and declares that western politics was biopolitics from the outset, so as to constitute the "primitive matrix" of western politics. Patton criticizes Agamben's conceptual fundamentalism. He insists that "[t] his analysis relies on a conceptual fundamentalism according to which the meaning of concepts is irrevocably determined by their origin." [36] Second, Agamben's most controversial approach in the *Homo Sacer* is the analysis of concentration camps, including those of the Boer War and the Second World War. As far as exceptions have become the rule, concentration camps are the "hidden matrix" of western biopolitics. This logic extends not only to the Nazi's concentration camps and refugee camps that have emerged around the world, but also to seemingly harmless spaces. This view of portraying the concentration camp as a "hidden matrix" or "name of modernity" in biopolitics decreases Agamben's argument's credibility, and has resulted in critique of his European centralism [27].

Agamben [4], apparently, was aware of these criticisms and

tried to revise his point of view in the later series of "Homo Sacer", *The Kingdom and the Glory*. Agamben intended to develop two paradigms of Christian theology, political theology and economic theology, so as to foster economics of governmentality consistent with Foucault's later governmentality. He also employed it to supplement the pan-political ontological argument that sovereignty was the key of biopolitics. Besides, Agamben still accepted Marx's legacy of early dichotomy between religion and secularism, which inevitably had a strong religious color and deviated from Marx's road to the world.

Agamben's approach is closely related to the methodology he advocated. Agamben combines the archaeology of Foucault's *Archaeology of knowledge* with "discipline and punishment", as well as Benjamin's method of breaking the narrative and temporal continuity of history. Thus he grasps the pictures of bare life and concentration camps as a paradigm. "[It] is a singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is a part and which, at the same time, it constitutes." [3] In essence, without advocating causality, Agamben's paradigm fundamentally mixes diachronic and synchronic in order to decipher the contemporary phenomenon.

From Foucault to Agamben, biopolitics is regarded as a negative political form, which must be resisted and overcome, especially according to Agamben. The core of Agamben's biopolitics results from the production of naked life, which is also a death politics. Recently, contrary to this dominant negative view on biopolitics, a new and more positive form take on biopolitics has started to emerge. An example is the view on biopolitics cultivated by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in *Empire* [20] and *Multitude* [21]. They compare the hegemony of the empire and the production of biopolitics with the revolutionary significance of the Multitude. Another example is the view on biopolitics put forward by Roberto Esposito in his *Bios* [10] and *Communitas* [11]. He finds a more positive and affirmative state of life in the biopower.

Negri's own radical Italian legacy contributed enormously to the popularity of the *Empire* all around the world at the turn of the twenty-first century. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's interpretation of Foucault stands at the polar opposite of Agamben's. Hardt and Negri interpret the biopolitical nature of the new paradigm of power as a form of power that regulates social life from its interior. To do so they resolutely change the eventual horizon for biopolitics and biopower to include society and the social space in which life and politics encounter each other. Although Negri and Hardt borrow Foucault's concept of biopolitics in *Empire*, they assume that Foucault is finally subject to structuralist epistemology. As compelling as Foucault's account is for a contemporary ontology of ourselves, they claim that "[w] hat Foucault fails to grasp finally are the real dynamics of production in biopolitical society." [20] However, they do not put forward a complete theory of biopolitics, and rather borrow the core resources of ethics and philosophy from others to emphasize the revolutionary potential of biopolitics. By combining

Deleuze's notion of "societies of control", Foucault's biopower, Agamben's paradigm of biopolitics with Marx's *Capital*, Negri and Hart explain the intensification and generalization of the normalizing apparatuses of disciplinarily that internally animate our shared and daily practices. Negri and Hart strive for providing a positive option for the negative effect of Agamben's "death politics". On the ground of a new comprehension of labor and subjectivity, they create a positive biopolitics, which provides a political and economic biopolitical tendency that varies from Foucault's and Agamben's. From Negri and Hart's own perspective, biopower is not only subordinate to power, but also excluded from power. Unlike Foucault, Negri and Hart believe that capitalism can also be achieved without the human body entering the production mechanism. On the contrary, for their part, the new concepts of production and labor can be seen as a place of resistance. The production of biopolitics means not only as the production of labor, but also as the production of interaction, influence, discourse, and new subjective form, which can resist the oppression of biopower. Negri and Hart consider biopolitical production as a new political subjectivity, that is, the multitude. The biopower is transformed into a new paradigm of power, that is, empire. The masses have the potential to rebel against the empire.

Roberto Esposito considers immunity to be a method of coming to terms with contemporary biopolitics. His goal is to demonstrate how the establishment of a biopolitical language across a number of wide-ranging disciplines cannot be thought of independently from that language's communitarian connotations. In this sense, Esposito outlines a genealogy of immunity in classic liberalism. Immunization emerges as profoundly constitutive of a liberal, political lexicon, which includes property, liberty, and sovereignty. He doesn't reverse Foucault's interpretation of how life becomes the object of the political so much as complements it; immunization is seen as the way by which biopolitics both preserves and negates life. Esposito elaborates further how biopolitics may be situated within the horizon of immunization. Of special significance is the role of the body for both sovereign power and biopower. Building on Foucault's ambiguous description of the norm sketched in "Right of Power and Life over Death," Esposito reasons that immunity and biopower in modernity have become co-terminous, and that immunization of living bodies turns into self-destruction. Alternative narrative can be found in immunity's opening to community and to the community's untapped power to produce norms in living bodies. Esposito's concept of the common is distinctly less indebted to political theology than that of Agamben. It emerges out of a conflict that takes place between individual bodies and life itself. Such a conflict becomes the site of Esposito's read out of which newly emerging forms of life held in common become visible. Immunization, biopower, as well as the preservation of the body's borders become the mere specular image of a common capable of composing immanent singularities that do not move to shield or rebuff life.

In Esposito's opinion, the essence of modern biopolitics is immune logic. Biopolitics promotes self-defense through the

controlled inclusion of danger, that is, the integration of death into life in order to guard life. Nazism is a quintessential example of this logic. His discussion on biopolitics based on Foucault's thought can become another representative discussion of biopolitics literature in western radical philosophy. He escapes the analytical way of traditional political philosophy, places the exploration of modern political thought in the sphere of biopolitics, and searches for the fulcrum of his theory in plenty of branches such as biomedicine. The concrete operation of this theory lies in his introduction of the category of immunity. The immune paradigm is not only the core category of his biopolitical theory analysis, but also the most essential conceptual tool in his consideration of modern political philosophy, which differs from Agamben and Negri's. Although Esposito shares a variety of perspectives with Agamben, he does not focus as much on the analysis of totalitarianism and Nazism as Agamben did, nor does he specifically discuss the living state of individuals under the sovereign rule, not to mention the hope of breaking through the predicament in the advent of the Messiah. In addition, in his construction of positive biopolitics, he does not follow the research trend of Negri to turn to the shaping of revolutionary political subjects, but continues to excavate the internality of life and explore the hidden vitality of life itself. Esposito critiques the logical flaws contained in Foucault's biopolitics itself and the two extreme interpretation models represented by Agamben and Negri. However, this immune paradigm of thinking is not necessarily superior to other philosophers and thinkers, and perhaps the immune paradigm even slides towards conservatism. In the era of globalization, a series of new events and phenomena require an explanation that is distinct from the traditional ones in order to reveal the truth shrouded in fantasy, and in order to clarify the direction of the maturation of things. It also provides us with highly effective solutions to the various problems presented in the context of the new era, and the biopolitics of the immune paradigm is only a new perspective of discussion.

It is generally conceived that Foucault embodies Nietzsche's distant perspective into more accurate archaeology and genealogy, and combined with the intuitive method of phenomenology, deeply dissects the power link of modernity. Agamben tries to establish a link between western politics and metaphysical nihilism, and repeatedly compares the contemporary political situation with the metaphysical situation of the current times. With the help of Heidegger, he constructs his political ontology and takes the opposition between *zoè* and *bios* as the perspective transition of ontological differences, thus trying to prove that the forgetting of existence and the rejection of *zoè* are two aspects of the same trend. At the same time, Agamben saves the idea of subject from Heidegger's destruction of the history of existence, and rejects his way of action with the metaphysics of subjectivity. It is the "medicine" of Benjamin's critique of "violence" to solve the "poison" of Heidegger. Depending on Spinoza's absolute internality, the empire of Negri and Hart and the core of their production of biopolitics are opposed to popular affirmation and creativity, although they also rely on it.

Biopolitics is understood as an inherent revolutionary force, which puts forward the limits of sovereignty and accessible changes, including its supranational form of empire.

As a kind of political imagination, Foucault, Agamben, Negri, and Hart inject new imagination into politics, while social theory becomes radicalized. Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller published their book *Biopolitics* in 1994. They placed the theme of biopolitics within the theory of modernity and argued that contemporary biopolitics evolved alongside the academic debates and media discussions on health, the environment, gender, and race that took place in the United States in the 1990s. [12] As mentioned earlier, the innovation of terms prefixed with bios indicate the extensive radicalization of social theory of humanities and social sciences, and expresses its own political concern based on subject reflection as well as re-creation of social theory.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens observes that in the last few decades of the 20th century, modernity entered a new stage, that is, late modernity. This new stage does not represent the end of modern times, as post-modern diagnosis may suggest, but rather represents its progression and radicalization. With the transmutation from modernity to late modernity, Giddens also sees fundamental political changes. From his own perspective, modernity is to a large extent marked by a political form of “Emancipatory politics”, which has the goal of eliminating social and political coercion and overcoming illegal rule. Although the focus on emancipatory politics has decisively promoted the project of modernity (Habermas), individuals can see a new kind of politics today, which represents a fundamentally different type of awareness. Giddens claims that “Life politics refers to radical engagements which seek to further the possibilities of a fulfilling and satisfying life for all, and in respect of which there are no ‘others’.” [18] With life politics, Giddens explains the theoretical effect triggered by biopolitics since Foucault.

After the 1960s, social theory showed an evident trend of radicalization, which has an imponderable connection with the rapid progress of post-war capitalism. In a direct sense, the May 1968 storm in France was a turning point. The consequence is that classical Marxism is ruinously challenged, and the logic of Western Marxism came to an end. The trend of thought with structuralism as the core completely released its inherent potential. Under the political purport of opposing capitalism, all kinds of radical social theories began to prevail. There is no doubt that the biopolitical turn is part of this radical theory. It also offers rich theoretical resources and crucial political potential for the radicalization of social theory.

Regarding the dissimilar biopolitical paradigm, Foucault puts forward a complete initial framework, on the basis of which Agamben, Negri, and Esposito revise or transcend. In the final impact of the “biopolitical turn”, it has played a part in the more radicalized evolution of social theory, which has had an essential effect in the field of humanities and social sciences. In contemporary times, biopolitics is popular in a considerable number of areas such as life, race, gender, ethics and sex, which makes biopolitics full of multiple political

imagination. Fundamentally speaking, contemporary biopolitical turn has led to the overall radicalization of social theory. As biopolitics is challenged by rapid rise of capitalism after the war, it also brings more critical political and social problems. Consequently, the apprehending of the new conditions and consequences of capitalism reflects the challenge to the applicability of Marx’s historical materialism and the critique of the political economy. The result of this challenge is a shift from Marx’s emancipatory politics to biopolitics (Foucault), life politics (Giddens) or identity politics (Hall). Quite evidently, its fundamental purpose is to carry out endless critique of capitalism in a formal way, and to open up the inherent demands of pluralistic values.

## 4. Marxism and Biopolitics

As a distinct academic perspective, biopolitics has gradually grown and become one of the main issues in western radical social theory over the past two decades, despite the long and complex history of the problem of life or philosophy of life. The new theoretical perspective of biopolitics bases its premise and core resources on the life politics theory put forward by Foucault in the 1960s and 1970s. It turns Foucault’s theory of biopolitics into a prominent reference for the radical leftists to discuss this topic, and provides the boundary of meta-theory for the latecomers to measure the boundary and flank of biopolitics. Biopolitics, elucidated by Foucault and interpreted and expanded by Agamben, Negri, Hart and others, finally exerts an overwhelming influence on the domain of humanities and social sciences in the west. Thus it forms a significant trend of thought and continuously promotes the biopolitics turn of this trend of thought.

From the perspective of history of thought, Foucault, based on the study of Marx’s *Capital*, extends the discipline based on Marx’s workshop and factory to the whole society, thus opening up an essential part of biopolitics. Agamben does not devote any attention to Althusser’s “epistemological rupture” between ideology and science in the early and later period of Marx, and rather turns to Marx’s early *Manuscript of Economics and philosophy in 1844*. He accepts Marx’s analogy on the separation between religion and the secular state, and consequently, he constructs the unique theoretical structure of his biopolitics. Negri and Hart are fond of the “Fragment on Machines” in Marx’s outline, and sketch the biopolitics of immaterial labor on the foundation of “general intellect”, which promotes the rise of Italian autonomism. Accordingly, in this sense, the biopolitics in Marxist theory can be explained consequently.

One should not merely consider the value of the biopolitical perspective from the angle of change or rupture of the theoretical logic, for doing so would overstate the weightiness of Foucault’s biopolitics theory. Aside from the deepening of modern critical logic, biopolitics is, to a certain extent, also the product of human life. Even there is no specific system to discuss biopolitics in the classic Marxism, biopolitics is not a deficiency. Marxism certainly emphasizes the historical evidence that supports the critique of capitalism and the

political purport of the liberation of the proletariat. The emphasis itself, conversely, does not stem from its neglect of biopolitical problems, but rather stems from the objective premise and condition which are confronted by the critique and project of modernity in the original context.

In *Manuscript of Economics and philosophy in 1844*, which displays the vital changes in Marx's early thoughts, alienated labor is explained by traditional Marxism as the tendency of humanism. From the perspective of biopolitics, on the contrary, alienated labor represents the examination of the objective situation of workers' labor in capitalist society. This special implication lies in the deviation between alienated labor and workers' life activities under capitalist conditions. The idiosyncratic value of emphasizing this point is to shift attention from humanistic hermeneutics and point out the illegality of the possession of workers' lives under the condition of capitalism with the purport of biopolitics. Furthermore, in *The German Ideology*, which marks the birth of Marx and Engels' [30] new world outlook, Marx and Engels regard "the production and reproduction of material life" as the premise and foundation for the existence and blossom of human beings. Biopolitics is to take "the production and reproduction of material life" as its due meaning in the same consciousness. From here, it is also conceivable that Agamben traces the meaning of "bare life" of biopolitics to ancient Greece, although it inevitably has defects and deficiencies. In the *Economic manuscript 1857-1858*, which is a principal manuscript of *Capital* [31], Marx supposes that the rule of capital over labor is not only the rule of dead labor over living labor, but also the phagocytosis of capital to life. In this manuscript, the "Fragment on Machines" is indispensably regarded as the most precious by Negri, Virno, and other Italian autonomous schools. In *Capital*, capital aims at the multiplication of value from the production of absolute surplus value to the production of relative surplus value, from the primitive accumulation of capital to the general accumulation. In this process, workers are invariably in the fate of being excluded, squeezed, controlled, and disciplined. David Harvey highly affirms the advantageous impact of Marx's *Capital* on Foucault's *Discipline and Punishment* [14]. He takes the attitude that "Foucault does a magnificent job [...] of generalizing Marx's argument and giving it substance." [22] In this sense, whether it is the discipline of individual workers and their bodies, or the regulation of workers, workers are in the state of bare life, their physical and intellectual activities will be under the rule of capital.

Naturally, it shouldn't be surprising that, with reference to the contemporary biopolitics, Marx's discussion of biopolitics is nothing but a complete theoretical structure and level. First, in line with historical materialism, Marx considers the production and reproduction of material life as the vital premise and foundation of human beings, which affirms the basic meaning of human life activities. Second, Marx highly highlights the extraction of human life under the conditions of capitalism. In the nexus between means and purpose, workers are the means for capital proliferation and

surplus value. Last but not least, biopolitics bridges the division between humanism and scientism, subject dimension and object dimension. It reveals that the critique of capitalism is not biased, but has a comfortable orientation, so as to respond to the later theorists' criticism of the lack of subject dimension in Marx's *Capital* at another level. From this point of view, Marx is not short of biopolitical facet, on the contrary, he uses a substantial amount of biopolitical theory and structure. Marx has both the critique of political economy and of biopolitics, which together critically constitute a complete standpoint of the critique of contemporary capitalism.

After Marx and Engels, the Marxist biopolitical analysis does not stagnate. In Weber's eyes, the formation and advancement of capitalist society are the product of rationalization in the process of western social change, that is, the result of instrumental rationality. Due to the mechanism of rationalization, the economic and political systems of capitalist society have completely lost their autonomy. As a consequence, the meaning and value of human man are lost. The reason becomes a tool to enslave people. Lukács [28] sees that, the individual is ruled by abstraction in Marx's *Economic manuscript 1857-1858*. Lukács puts forward his reification theory of capitalist criticism by combining Marx's critique of capitalist fetishism with Weber's rationalization. He further tries to reveal the decline of working class consciousness under capitalist rule and the fate of life under the rule of instrumental rationality. Horkheimer and Adorno [23] extend the critique of instrumental rationality to the critique of human enlightenment and civilization, and diagnose the current capitalist society as a "fully managed world". This diagnosis of Horkheimer and Adorno plays a considerable role in laying the foundation for the later biopolitics, which is often perceived to be the forerunner of it. Not only does their diagnosis of capitalism constitute a crucial starting point and reference for Foucault, Agamben and others, but more remarkably, instrumental rationality is transformed into later biopolitics through the deepening Horkheimer and Adorno, and become the ruling mode of neo-liberalism.

Since the 1940s, Lefebvre [25] has argued that daily life is the deepest link between social activities and the structure of the social system. He criticizes that the life activities of individuals in modern daily life have been completely dominated by the abstract space of the homogenization of capital. Then, human life activities such as production, consumption, consciousness, and experience have been brought into the capitalist system more effectively. He asserts that art comes from the passionate creation of life and does not succumb to the identity logic of the commodity world. "Let everyday life become a work of art! Let every technical means be employed transformation of everyday life!" [25] In the ultimate sense, he proposes a kind of revolutionary poetics which resorts to physical resistance. On the basis of "Letting everyday life a work of art", Guy Debord [9] further offers to create a new "daily life situation" with art to penetrate the imperialist logic of the landscape and the materialized illusion of capitalism. Standing on the border between individual

survival and happiness, Marcuse declares that “Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the political fight.” [29] Based on the principle of “defending life”, he loudly declares his “big refusal” to capitalism. Marcuse’s rebel movement is a “cultural revolution” that affects the whole western left. It is a new life movement that aimed at changing daily life.

The aim of combing and examining the problems of biopolitics in Marxist theory is not to construct a legal historical premise for the discussion of current biopolitics. On the contrary, it aims to look at biopolitics from the perspective of biopolitics as a battlefield in the new era conditions. It also need to respond to the task proposed by the era conditions on the basis of Marxism. In the process of hearing and diagnosing the theoretical aspects of biopolitics, Marxism is in a vital position, and has become a source that cannot be ignored. It can not only rediscover and activate biopolitics in Marxist theory according to new era conditions, but also criticize capitalism from different dimensions and promote the contemporary application of Marxism. Additionally, only in this way can we closely combines the discussion of contemporary biopolitics with Marxism, and make it obtain more lasting critical effect from the position of Marx’s historical science.

## 5. Conclusion

Marxism is closely related to the biopolitical turn. Marxism is not only one of the major schools of thought that contributed to the rise of the biopolitical turn, but also greatly inspired the creation of biopolitical methodology. It should therefore be noted that the biopolitics was constructed in part by the Italian autonomous school represented by Negri, Hart and Virno, but also, and very much so, by Marx’s *Grundrisse*. Other discussions regarding biopolitics have more or less directly drawn from Marx’s methods and horizons. There are even fewer Marxist explanations of the new changes in capitalism and theories that drive Marxism. In the process of the biopolitical turn, Marxism was more or less scrutinized. A myriad of theories, thus, trying to confirm Marx’s outdated or advocate to surpass Marx.

Whether to reap huge fruits from Marx or not, in a sense, contemporary biopolitical theorists are directly or indirectly related to Marx in the imagination of political struggle. This correlation is directly reflected in Marx’s “antagonism” exposition of his historical materialism in the *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* [33] in 1859. Marx harbors the idea that the relations of production of the bourgeoisie are the last form of antagonism in the process of social production. The antagonism here does not refer to the antagonism of the individual, but rather it refers to the antagonism that grows out of the social living conditions of the individual. At this point, Foucault’s “rebellious historiography” and its historical epistemology are based on the antagonistic conditions of society; Agamben magnifies this antagonism to the entire western political structure with the central axis of sovereignty and bare life; Negri and Hart revealed the power of domination and creative resistance with

the inevitable confrontation between the empire and the multitude. As a matter of fact, the essence is that, in the absence of political demands for class stability, the rebellion against capitalism merely expresses the Maoist slogan “where there is oppression, there is resistance”.

There are two reasons for trying to surpass Marx. First, with the end of Western Marxism, theorists have retreated from the class and declared its end owing to the new changes in the growth of capitalism. Second, Marxism is undoubtedly attacked due to its reductionism from the outlook of class. On this issue, class liberation is supplanted by biopolitics with the aspect of gender, sex, race, ecology and so on. Conall Cash notes that, however, “They [Marx and Engels] determine that social change takes place through political struggle for power by social groups, the most fundamental of which are classes; and second, they identify the state as the ultimate terrain of this struggle as, in Lenin’s words, ‘an organ for the oppression of one class by another.’” Against the backdrop of being unable to change the whole society, they try to seek the struggle and liberation in these areas. Paradoxically, the dilemma is that it will not be completely liberated if the society as a whole is not changed. Negri and Hart take the collective object of the multitude as their purpose, which represents the arduous attempt to seek such a breakthrough. Sergei Prozorov challenges the assumption that the biopolitical governance means the end of democracy, arguing for a positive synthesis of biopolitics and democracy. He develops a vision of democratic biopolitics where diverse forms of life can coexist on the basis of their reciprocal recognition as free, equal and in common. [37] It is undoubtedly a pipe dream, for the very reason that it is an incomplete struggle.

What’s more, due to the grasping and rejection of Marxism’s determinism, especially economic determinism, biopolitical theorists have abandoned Marx’s critical perspective and political economy, and criticized capitalism by means of power and politics. Even if people such as Negri start with “immaterial labor” based on Marx’s *Grundrisse* [32], they are merely trying to prove the new changes of capitalism and affirm Marx’s outdated, so as to surpass Marx. Their fundamental defect is that they try to create revolutionary action with the subject to subvert capitalism from a strong political point of view. The theory of biopolitics does not make sense of the essence of capitalism from the inherent contradictions and laws of social and historical advancement. It solely captures the fragments of power and tries to replace the logic of the growth of the inherent contradictions of capitalism. As a result, biopolitical theorists have been undoubtedly challenged in their ability to make theoretical commitments to the future and to their objects. Without grasping of the inherent contradiction of capitalism from the perspective of the object, the revolutionary action of the subject dimension will become blind. At this point, they do not have a deep grasp of Marx’s historical dialectics.

From the perspective that links biopolitics with Marxism, it seems like Althusser tries to bring Marxism outside Marx, and



Foucault intends to save Marx from Marxism. Of paramount importance is that radical leftists simply spread Marxism in a more fragmented way, and what they caught was nothing more than a fragment of Marxism. They apply their standpoints or local positions to the study of contemporary social theory in a more radical manner. The fundamental purport of this change of position lies in the change of attitude towards Marx's historical science. This conversion is from the establishment of Marx's historical science, to the redefinition of this historical science, and to the post-modernist abandonment of the fundamental core of historical science so as to open up its space and grasp its fragments and radicalize it. Biopolitics expresses its appeal of pluralistic values by its endless critique of capitalism as a mere formality.

The biopolitical turn takes politics as its reasonable core to reconstruct the contemporary political paradigm, puts forward a profound appreciation of contemporary politics and power, fundamentally affects the current field of humanities, and promotes the radicalization of social theory. Whether it is "new wine in a new bottle" or "old wine in a new bottle", there is no denying that the "new bottle" of "biopolitics" has been filled with too much. When this concept has too many meanings, the expansion effect of the concept will make it fall into the entanglement of its own connotation and produce theoretical complexity, thus losing its ability to diagnose the fundamental contradiction in reality. Esposito reasons that "Far from having acquired a definitive order, the concept of biopolitics appears to be traversed by an uncertainty, by an uneasiness that impedes every stable connotation." [9] When the concept of biopolitics appears widely in all branches of the humanities, it also indicates that its initial political imagination and potential will also be exhausted.

After the 1960s, with the rise of structuralism as the main motivation, there was a general suspicion of meta-theory, which had a vital effect on the thought of the left. The consequence of this salient effect lies in the disillusionment of meta-theory, which engenders the narrative crisis of the left. On the face of it, the leftist theory showed a state of excessive prosperity in the 1960s, which had an impact on almost all areas of human social life, notably in the whole humanities and social sciences research. From the practical purpose, the prosperity of the left thought demonstrates that if referring to the conclusion of the *Communist Manifesto* "proletarians all over the world unite", Marx predicts from the objective perspective of social history that the solidarity of the proletariat was an inevitable trend. At the same time, from the indispensable conditions for transforming the world, this demand for change can only be feasible if theorists seek the unity of the proletariat. It must be pointed out that the performance of the left today unexpectedly puts the strict Marxists in a state of confusion in theory and incompetence in action. Leftist theory flourished, however Marx's purport to transform the world was dashed. This dilemma is also encountered undoubtedly by today's leftists. As Thomas Nail pointed out that "it is time to return to Marx again, but this time to a Marx of movement and motion." [34] The answer to the question needs us to continue to look for.

## References

- [1] Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [2] Agamben, G. (2005) *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [3] Agamben, G. (2009) *The Signature of All Things: On Method*. New York: Zone Books.
- [4] Agamben, G. (2011) *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [5] Althusser, L. (1985) *For Marx*. London: Verso.
- [6] Bourdieu, P. (1996) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [7] Cash, C. (2021) "Communism", in *Understanding Marx, Understanding Modernism*, Eds. Steven. M, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- [8] Canguilhem, G (1978). *On the Normal and the Pathological*. Springer.
- [9] Debord, G. (1995) *The Society of the Spectacle*. Zone Books.
- [10] Esposito, E. (2008) *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- [11] Esposito, E. (2009) *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [12] Fehér, F., Heller, A (1994). *Biopolitics*. Aldershot, UK: Avebury.
- [13] Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- [14] Foucault, M. (1995) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- [15] Foucault, M. (2002) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- [16] Foucault, M. (2002) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York and London: Routledge.
- [17] Foucault, M. (2006) *History of Madness*. New York and London: Routledge.
- [18] Giddens, A. (1991) *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [19] Haraway, D. (1989) "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*.
- [20] Hardt, M., Negri, A (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [21] Hardt, M., Negri, A (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. Penguin Press.
- [22] Harvey, D. (2010) *A Companion to Marx's Capital*. New York and London: Verso.
- [23] Horkheimer, M., Adorno, T (2002) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- [24] Lemke, T (2011) *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- [25] Lefebvre, H. (1971) *Everyday Life in the Modern World*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- [26] Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966) *The Savage Mind*. Letchworth: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- [27] Mills, C (2018). *Biopolitics*, New York: Routledge.
- [28] Lukács, G. (1972) *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- [29] Marcuse, H. (1974) *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Beacon Press.
- [30] Marx, K., Engels, F. (1998) *The German Ideology*. Prometheus Books.
- [31] Marx, K. (1906) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Random House.
- [32] Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*. Vintage Books.
- [33] Marx, K. (2008) *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Book Jungle.
- [34] Nail, T. (2020) *Marx in motion: A New Materialist Marxism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [35] Nancy, J. L (2002) Note sur le terme “biopolitique.” In *La création du monde ou la mondialisation*. Paris: Gallilée.
- [36] Patton, P (2007). Agamben and Foucault on Biopower and Biopolitics, in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*. Eds. DeCaroli, S. D. and Calarco, M. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- [37] Prozorov, Sergei. (2019) *Democratic Biopolitics: Popular Sovereignty and the Power of Life*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.