Taking care of life
A biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare

Naam: T. Sikma (Tijs)
Studentnummer: s4105141
Begeleider: Antonio Cimino
Lengte: 19287 woorden
Datum: 7 januari 2019

Scriptie ter verkrijging van de graad
"Master of Arts" in de filosofie
Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen

I hereby declare and assure that I, Tijs Sikma, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works – including electronic media – have been identified and the sources clearly stated.

Place: Nijmegen. Date: 07-01-2019.

Table of contents

Abstract

This thesis examines to what extent the thought of the philosophers Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito on biopolitics can be useful for examining the history of healthcare. The main argument is that their analysis of the relation between power and life may provide a new, original and fruitful perspective for historians. I explicate the thought of these philosophers with regard to biopolitics, analyse how it can be applied to the history of healthcare and determine to what extent a useful framework for the history of healthcare can be constructed on the basis of it.

1. Introduction

In 1974 the French philosopher Michel Foucault held a lecture on the history of social medicine. During a lecture in which the negative side effects of the increased influence of medical knowledge on society were a central topic, his remarks on the future must have sounded particularly ominous: 'Nowadays, with the techniques at the disposal of medicine, the possibility for modifying the genetic cell structure not only affects the individual or his descendants but the entire human race. Every aspect of life now becomes the subject of medical intervention. We do not know yet whether man is capable of fabricating a living being which will make it possible to modify the entire history of life and the future of life.'[1]

Looking at recent developments in medicine, this statement seems somehow prophetic. The future of life itself increasingly seems to be at our fingertips. In 2010 English researchers were able to slow down the natural aging process of mice.[2] Some people already speculate that human natural death may therefore soon be a thing of the past. In January this year Chinese scientists were able to clone a primate and some scientists believe that it will not take long before we can clone humans.[3] In May this year Dutch scientists succeeded for the first time in building synthetic mouse embryos without using their sperm or egg cells.[4] This brings science possibly a step further in the prospect of creating completely artificial human life.

A significant element that ties these examples of increased control over life together is the way they are justified. The justification for such discoveries is almost always done on the basis of health. The practices of examination, dissection,

---

[1] Michel Foucault, "The Crisis of Medicine or the Crisis of Antimedicine?," *Foucault Studies*, no. 1, trans. Edgar C. Knowlton Jr. et al. (December 2004): 11.

[2] Ian Sample, "Harvard scientists reverse the ageing process in mice – now for humans," *The Guardian,* November 28, 2010, accessed October 27, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2010/nov/28/scientists-reverse-ageing-mice-humans.

[3] Helen Briggs, "First monkey clones created in Chinese laboratory," *BBC News*, January 24, 2018, accessed October 27, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/health-42809445.

[4] Michelle Roberts, "Scientists build synthetic embryos," *BBC News,* May 3, 2018, accessed October 27, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/health-43960363.

classification, improvement and even annulment of life that stem from the medical sciences are justified as means to improve the health of people. The experiment to reverse the aging process of mice is said to eventually benefit the field of regenerative medicine, the cloning of primates is done to provide better models for studying human diseases and the creation of synthetic embryos is justified to study small abnormalities at the beginning of pregnancy that may develop in diseases later in life.

Though I am in no way doubting the nobleness and honesty of these justifications or the importance of healthcare, it is striking how the ideal of health is at the forefront of human endeavours for ever more control over life. In the lecture of 1974 Foucault already argued that the control over life in medicine is always part of relations of power.[5] This aspect of healthcare – of how power and biological life are intertwined – is often neglected in analyses of it. Recent developments make research with regard to the relation between power and life in medicine however even more important. Due to progress in the medical sciences more and more aspects of our daily life are defined in terms of health, more and more possibilities are discovered to improve it, but because of a growing and aging world population relatively less means are available to distribute it evenly worldwide. Therefore, the stakes in the struggle about the definition, explanation and justification for the distribution of health become higher. Clarification and explanation of the relation between power and life in healthcare is necessary for a well-informed public debate and measured political decision making with regard to this topic. The central argument of this thesis is that the specific connections philosophers in biopolitics make visible between power and life can be used as a framework through which the history of healthcare can be re-examined in an original and fruitful way. A better understanding about how political power and biological life have been intertwined throughout the history of healthcare may help in finding more thoughtful and just answers to future political and ethical dilemmas that arise with our increased control over biological life.

---

[5] Foucault, "The Crisis of Medicine or the Crisis of Antimedicine?," 16-19.

1.1 What is biopolitics?

Biopolitics is an academic discipline that studies the relation between politics and biological life. German sociologist and social theorist Thomas Lemke discerns three different traditions with regard to biopolitics.[6] First of all, there exists a naturalist reading of biopolitics that studies politics as a product of biological life.[7] At the start of the twentieth century some scholars for instance considered the state to be a living organism that developed according to biological laws. Secondly, politicist readings of biopolitics study how political decisions affect biological life.[8] In the 1960s and 1970s academics for instance researched how political decisions affected ecologic systems. The third and youngest tradition that Lemke discerns is centred around a historical and relational notion of biopolitics. Lemke emphasizes that naturalist and politicist readings of biopolitics presuppose a stable hierarchy between life and politics: 'The advocates of naturalism regard life as being "beneath" politics, directing and explaining political reasoning and action. The politicist conception sees politics as being "above" life processes; here, politics is more than "pure" biology, going beyond the necessities of natural existence.'[9]

Lemke argues that both the naturalist and the politicist conception of biopolitics fail to account for the relationality and historicity of life and politics. He argues that life and politics are phenomena that have always influenced each other. Throughout history, new technological inventions have made it possible for societies to transform and control life in different ways. The idea of a natural life that is untouched by human political action thus seems to be absurd to him. Lemke also states that changing conceptions about life have historically transformed the nature of political action. The discovery of the mechanisms of life by biology has for instance changed the way politics is exercised. The administration and regulation of the life of populations – for instance the longevity and mortality of a

---

[6] Thomas Lemke, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 3-8.

[7] Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 9-21.

[8] Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 23-32.

[9] Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 4.

population – has become a core principle of modern politics. Lemke consequently discerns a third reading of biopolitics that precisely emphasizes the relationality and historicity of life and politics. Lemke situates the origin of this tradition in the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault from the 1970s. Foucault showed how since the eighteenth century knowledge about life processes is derived from statistical measurements of a population. This knowledge is consequently used by governments to effectively regulate the population. Knowledge about life that is derived from a population is therefore a product of both the objective biological reality of it and political decisions about what is measured and who are considered to be part of the population. Foucault therefore argued that both 'life' and 'politics' can be seen as historically contingent phenomena that mutually influenced each other.[10]

In this thesis I make use of the work of philosophers that follow the relational and historical reading of biopolitics. I think that these philosophers rightfully assume that both 'life' and 'politics' are notions that do not exist independently from human thought. These notions give expression to the specific ways a society chooses to conceptually organize the reality it encounters. Consequently, the meaning of these notions change when a society changes. The emergence of the science of biology has for instance changed our understanding of what life is and the emergence of mass media has for instance changed the nature of politics. By investigating the historical conditions in which notions such as life and politics originate and change, this tradition makes notable ruptures in history visible, instead of flattening it out as continuous.

The chapter 'Right of Death and Power over Life' in the first volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is generally considered to be a foundational text of this historical and relational reading of biopolitics.[11] Giorgio Agamben wrote *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* as an attempt 'to correct or at least

---

[10] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 83-110.

[11] Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 5-6.

complete'[12] Foucault's notion of biopolitics in 1998. In 2000 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri published the book *Empire*.[13] The content of this book was also highly indebted to Foucault's analysis of biopolitics. After these publications biopolitics became very popular in academia and the concept also took hold in fields as diverse as 'anthropology, geography, sociology, political science, theology, legal studies, bioethics, digital media, art history and architecture.'[14] This gave rise to a large amount of neologism such as bioculture, biomedia, biolegitimacy and bioart. Some scholars typified 'biopolitics' as a passing fad. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze note that many scholars still look down on it.[15] One must concede that a lot of the work of philosophers from the relational and historical biopolitical tradition is not very accessible and very extravagant claims are made in it. I hope that this thesis contributes in making the thought of some of these philosophers more accessible and comprehensible. In applying the often very general and abstract formulations of these philosophers to the concrete casus of the history of healthcare, their thought hopefully becomes more concrete and more easily intelligible.

To guarantee a thorough analysis I have limited myself to three philosophers. From the relational and historical tradition I have chosen to use the work of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito. These three thinkers are some of the most influential and well-known proponents of this biopolitical tradition. Each of them has developed a distinct and elaborate analysis of biopolitics in his career. Their work is in my estimation also particularly suitable for constructing a biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare. I have for instance excluded the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Though they can also be seen as influential proponents of the relational and historical tradition of

---

[12] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9.

[13] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[14] Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, ed. *Biopolitics: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 5.

[15] Campbell and Sitze, *Biopolitics*, 5.

biopolitics, their work is mostly restricted to the time period of the twentieth century and they do not dedicate much space to healthcare.

1.2 Methodology

In each chapter I reflect on the work of one of the three philosophers. At the start of each chapter I explicate which of the works from the philosopher I have used and how I have used it to develop a biopolitical framework. After this, I explain his understanding of biopolitics and I analyse how it can be applied to the history of healthcare. I have mainly made use of their own explicit elaborations on healthcare. However – because of changes in vocabulary and theory during the career of a philosopher or due to the fact that some of their statements can be interpreted in multiple ways – this analysis is partly the result of my own interpretation. Central to my analysis is the conviction that the originality and explanatory potential of the thought of the philosophers should have priority over accuracy about what they exactly meant originally.

In the analysis of the work of Foucault, Agamben and Esposito I have also given attention to their characterization of modernity. In the study of history there exists considerable debate about how modernity should be defined. The term generally expresses a wide range of historical processes and cultural phenomena that are thought to be connected in a period of time from roughly mid eighteenth century until the twentieth century.[16] The relational and historical tradition of biopolitics is largely inspired by Foucault's statement that the 'threshold of modernity has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies.'[17] This historical 'threshold of modernity' can in their work also be seen with regard to the history of healthcare. This thesis may therefore also

---

[16] The term is generally used to emphasize the radical transformation that Western society underwent in this period of time with regard to, for instance, scientific and technological progress, the emergence of capitalism and nation states, secularization, rationalization and industrialization. Peter Wagner, *Modernity: Understanding the Present* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 1-64.

[17] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* vol. 1, *An Introduction,* trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 143.

contribute to the historical-philosophical question of what it means to be living in modernity.

1.3 The structure of the thesis

This thesis consist of four chapters. In the first three chapters I analyse the work of each philosopher individually. This is done on chronological basis. In the first chapter I look at the work of Michel Foucault, who was the first to develop a relational and historical analysis of biopolitics. The biopolitical analysis of Giorgio Agamben is the subject of the second chapter. Agamben wrote his *Homo sacer* series largely as a response to Foucault. The work of Esposito is treated in chapter three. Roberto Esposito reacted in his books to both Foucault and Agamben. In the last chapter, the conclusion, I summarize my findings from the previous chapters and I conclude to what extent I think that the thought of the philosophers Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito on biopolitics can be useful for examining the history of healthcare

2. Michel Foucault

In this chapter I examine if a useful biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare can be constructed on the basis of the work of Michel Foucault. First I explicate the context of Foucault's understanding of biopolitics and the methodology I use. Secondly, I explain the specific understanding of the relation between politics and life in Foucault's notion of biopolitics. Thirdly, I synthesize this with other work of Foucault on healthcare and apply this to the history of healthcare. In the final section I evaluate to what extent Foucault's work can be useful for a biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare.

2.1 Methodology

One should be aware that this framework is based on my interpretation of Foucault's work and that it is not a description of a theory that definitively captures Foucault's thought on biopolitics and the history of healthcare. Two aspects of his work preclude formulating a definitive theory. The first problem is that Foucault makes use of the term 'biopolitics' in different ways throughout his work. Lemke distinguishes three different usages.[18] Foucault sometimes uses biopolitics in contrast to sovereign power, in other texts he coins it to explain the historical rise of racism and in other texts he connects it to self-governance and liberalism. The relation between power and life is furthermore also the subject of some of his earlier work. At the time he did however not refer to it with the word 'biopolitics' and in his later work on governmentality and subjectivity he even stops using the term. The second problem is that Foucault has never written a general history of healthcare. His reflections on the history of healthcare are scattered across his academic career. Foucault was a philosopher who continually adjusted and reformulated his thought throughout his life, eschewed formulating general theories and who coined a wide variety of new concepts and neologisms throughout his career. His writings on the history of healthcare therefore differ considerably depending on which of his neologisms he used.

The fact that Foucault never wrote a definitive theory about biopolitics and

---

[18] Lemke, *Biopolitics*, 34.

a general work about the history of healthcare does however not implicate that no coherent line of thought can be discerned with regard to these topics. I have taken the freedom to interpret Foucault's writings in such a way that it constitutes a framework that makes the originality and explanatory force of his thought visible. This framework could therefore on the one hand be judged on the basis of its explanatory power, and on the other hand, on the basis of its consistency with Foucault's thinking.

2.2 Foucault's understanding of biopolitics

Foucault has used, as I mentioned in the previous section, the notion of biopolitics in different ways. I have chosen to make use of the specific formulation he gives about biopower in the last chapter of the first volume of *History of Sexuality*. He uses 'biopower' often interchangeably with the word biopolitics. In this book he states the following: '(…) one would have to speak of bio-power to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.'[19] In this formulation he explicitly connects the notion of biopower with his ideas about knowledge and power. His understanding of biopolitics can in this way be synthesized with both his broader analysis of power-knowledge and his later work on governmentality. To fully understand Foucault's notion of biopower, it is necessary to first examine Foucault's specific understanding of power and power-knowledge.[20]

2.2.1 Power and power-knowledge

Foucault has never developed a complete theory of power.[21] This might seem

---

[19] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 143.

[20] In the previous citation he uses the term 'knowledge-power' (*savoir-pouvoir)*. I will instead mainly use the term 'power-knowledge' (*pouvoir-savoir*) as this is the way in which he most frequently seems to have expressed the notion. See for instance: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A.M. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Book, 1979), Michel Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

[21] Mark G. E. Kelly, *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1-6.

strange, because power plays a central role in a lot of his work. According to him, one must first understand the historical conditions that motivate a conceptualisation of power.[22] In other words, a hastily made definition of power would according to him risk ignoring aspects of reality that may be relevant for fully understanding it and could neglect the ideological preferences that motivate such a definition. Foucault thus argues that more empirical historical analysis of the phenomenon of power is necessary, before a 'metaphysics of power' is possible.[23]

Though he never gives a complete theory of power, he gives some general characteristics throughout his work.[24] Foucault's conceptualization of power can be seen as a reaction to traditional understandings of it. Power is traditionally understood as something that is wielded by individual entities. An example of this traditional conception is a king who rules over his subjects. In this example a king is said to have power because he can exercise his will and/or decide what his subjects have to do. Foucault instead stresses that power works independently from individual entities such as kings, states and economic classes. I think that the following formulation of Foucault clarifies his understanding of power the best: 'The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome.'[25]

Foucault's notion of power is thus about the way human actions are guided. Power relations can therefore be analysed on multiple levels. For instance, if I block someone's path in a hallway, I influence his possibilities of conduct – of reaching the other side of the hallway – and therefore I exert power over this person. Foucault generally does not study power on basis of the interpersonal level, but on the scale of societies. The conduct of every individual in a society is constantly guided through for instance discourses, norms, practices and traditions. The conduct of

---

[22] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4, trans. Leslie Sawyer (Summer, 1982): 786.

[23] Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 778.

[24] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* 81-102. Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended"*, 1-41. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 777-795.

[25] Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 789.

people is therefore guided by a complex interplay of power relations. In such instances, one can speak according to Foucault of strategies.[26] For Foucault, power is thus something that can be detached from an individual subject, but which nevertheless works according to a certain intentionality. For instance, a certain discourse guides the way people think and act, but is vice versa the result of how people think and act.

Power and knowledge directly imply one another according to Foucault. He writes: '(…) there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.'[27] To repeat, power is according to Foucault about 'guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome.' Knowledge concerns the way we grasp the world. Knowledge thereby structures the way we approach the world. In this sense knowledge guides our conduct. On the other hand, power relations make it possible to know conduct. Because a person's conduct is guided in such a way that the regularities of his behaviour can be observed, it becomes possible to acquire knowledge about him.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault for instance describes how the modern prison began to operate on the basis of knowledge from the sciences of criminology and psychology and how these sciences on the other hand became partly possible as a consequence of the power relations in the modern prisons. Re-education programmes in these prisons were based upon knowledge of psychology to effectively transform a prisoner in a person that could function in society. Such programmes were constantly adjusted on the basis of knowledge that was collected from the prisoner: for instance about his biographical past and his behaviour in the institution.[28] This knowledge about the individual prisoner was correlative with the fact that his conduct was regularized. Every day the prisoner would follow a strict

---

[26] Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 794.

[27] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27.

[28] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 220-293.

routine of activities and examinations. The regularity of his behaviour made it possible to collect knowledge about him.

2.2.2 Biopower and modernity

Biopower is in Foucault's work a power-knowledge based upon knowledge about biological life. Biopower regularizes the conduct of a subject on the basis of knowledge about his biological life. In the eighteenth century new fields of knowledge such as biology and the medical sciences began to structurally study the mechanisms of life. Foucault therefore places the historical origin of biopower at the start of modernity.[29] Life no longer appeared to be an inaccessible substrate, but something that could be examined, and by examining it and discovering its underlying mechanisms, it became possible to control it. Knowledge over life thus implicated power over life.

Foucault claims that the inclusion of the mechanisms of life into the order of power-knowledge changed the way power was exercised since the eighteenth century. This is why he refers to 'biopower' as a new 'technology' of power. He a new way of 'guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome.' Foucault argues that premodern governments merely concerned themselves with a negative relation to life: 'essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself.'[30] With regard to life, a sovereign could only decide to kill or decide to let someone live. In the modern era power could instead inscribe itself in the mechanisms of life.[31] Due to the discovery of knowledge about life, new possibilities arose to govern by reinforcement instead of repression.

For instance, instead of combatting criminality, madness and illness through locking people up or excluding them, governments began to investigate the forces that gave rise to these phenomena and bend them in a positive direction. The criminal is socialized, the mad received therapy and diseases were prevented by advocating a healthier lifestyle. By inscribing itself in the life of the subject,

---

[29] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 141-142.

[30] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 136.

[31] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 138-139.

biopower thus proved to be a more effective means for government and therefore gradually superseded sovereign power as the dominant technology of power.

2.2.3 Three different forms of biopolitics

Before I apply Foucault's biopolitical thought to the history of healthcare, I explicate the different distinctions that Foucault made with regard to it. I would argue that three forms of biopower can be discerned in his work.[32]

The first and historically earliest form of biopower is what Foucault called the 'anatomo-politics of the human body.'[33] Foucault writes that this 'pole' of biopower 'centred on the body as a machine.'[34] On the basis of knowledge about the functioning of individual bodies, they could be optimally distributed, examined, supervised and controlled to achieve a certain goal. For instance, the institution of the modern public school used knowledge about the body as a means to transform children in well-behaving citizens.[35] A multiplicity of students were divided in different classes according to their individuality, such as age, intelligence and personality. The classrooms were designed in a way that the teacher could optimally oversee their behaviour and correct them if need be. The children were learned to sit still in class and they were periodically examined to take track of their individual development. If the child received low grades or proved to be unable to sit still and listen, it was put in another class or it would get extra attention from the teacher. Knowledge about the individual bodies thus helped to guide their conduct.

The second form of biopower that Foucault discerns is 'a bio-politics of the

---

[32] In *History of Sexuality* Foucault explicitly only distinguished 'anatomo-politics of the human body' and 'bio-politics of the population' as two 'poles' of biopower. However he notes in his lectures of *The Birth of Biopolitics* that '. . . only when we know what this governmental regime called liberalism was, will we be able to grasp what biopolitics is.' For this reason I have interpreted his analysis of liberalism as a form of biopower. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 22.

[33] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139.

[34] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139.

[35] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 170-184.

population.'[36] This form of biopower was not centred on knowledge about the individual body, but 'focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary.'[37] Because of the emergence of the knowledge of statistics it became possible to track down the objective characteristics of a population and government could consequently be adjusted to these characteristics. While the anatomo-politics of the body relied on controlling a body through its individuality, the biopolitics of the population relied on controlling a population on the basis of general biological properties.

The effects of different political measures could consequently be calculated and these results were compared to determine what the most effective way was to maintain certain measurable averages: 'The mortality rate has to be modified or lowered; life expectancy has to be increased; the birth rate has to be stimulated. And most important of all, regulatory mechanisms must be established to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field.'[38] An example of biopolitics of the population Foucault gives is that modern governments began to institute welfare programs because, though these programs would initially be expensive, it could statistically be measured that they increased the economic productivity of the population and that they led to a decrease of the occurrence of criminality and illnesses. Modern governments thus calculated that these programs would eventually benefit the life of the population as a whole and that they could compensate for negative phenomena that would 'naturally' emerge out of a population, such as diseases and criminality.[39]

A third form of biopower that can be discerned in Foucault's work is liberalism. Foucault shows that the principles of the 'bio-politics of the population'

---

[36] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139.

[37] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139.

[38] Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*", 240.

[39] Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 16-38.

were increasingly criticized during the nineteenth century. The main question politicians asked themselves was how far the regularization of the population had to go. Through statistical analysis an endless amount of averages and correlations could be found and theoretically an endless amount of policies could be implemented to optimize a population. However, this led to resistance because people desired to live free and independent from state power. Consequently the question arose: 'How can the phenomena of "population," with its specific effects and problems, be taken into account in a system concerned about respect for legal subjects and individual free enterprise? In the name of what and according to what rules can it be managed?'[40]

Foucault argues that liberalism – defined as a specific art of government which is based on the maxim that the government always governs too much[41] – was a response to these dilemmas. The keyword for understanding liberalism in this sense is efficiency: what is the most efficient way to govern society? This resulted in a different relation of power to life. States no longer simply imposed certain rules on the behaviour of citizens, but distanced themselves from the private sphere to the extent that citizens could regulate themselves: 'The rationality of the governed must serve as the regulating principle for the rationality of government.'[42] The governed subjected themselves to a certain rationality and consequently their conduct was guided by themselves according to externally defined limits. Precisely statistical analyses of a population made it possible to track down the most effective measures to accomplish an optimal equilibrium and eliminate unnecessary measures.

For instance, in a country public transport is privatized and a free market of competing individuals is created which should result in an equilibrium of supply and demand. Government would consequently only have to intervene if public values were in danger in the equilibrium, for instance if eventually only the richest

---

[40] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 317.

[41] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 22.

[42] Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 312.

could make use of public transport. By making use of the will and rationality of subjects themselves, the life of a population is regulated according to clearly defined limits with a minimum of costs and efforts.

2.3 A biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare

In the previous two sections I explicated Foucault's understanding of biopolitics. In this section I describe how a biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare can be constructed on the basis of it. First I explain the place of healthcare within Foucault's general understanding of biopower. After this I analyse the history of healthcare on the basis of three forms of biopower that he discerned.

2.3.1 Biopower and healthcare

What is the place of healthcare within Foucault's general understanding of biopolitics? Foucault mentions the medical sciences as one of the fields of knowledge concerned with life that emerged in the eighteenth century.[43] One could rightfully argue that the practice of medicine or the concern for health is much older than the eighteenth century, but only in the eighteenth century did medicine bring 'life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations.'[44]

From Foucault's work it becomes clear that the uncovering of the mechanisms of life by the medical sciences at the end of the eighteenth century was as much a process of knowledge as it was a process of power. The accumulation of medical knowledge about the body was only possible because these bodies subjected themselves to a certain regularity. For instance, they had to lay still on the operating table, patients had to answer medical questions about their body or they had to undergo medical examinations. The structural dissection of the mechanisms of life was only possible because living bodies were ordered in a way that structural observation was possible which made medical differences between bodies visible: 'Gradually, an administrative and political space was articulated upon a therapeutic space; it tended to individualize bodies, diseases, symptoms,

---

[43] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 141-144.

[44] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 143.

lives and deaths; it constituted a real table of juxtaposed and carefully distinct singularities. Out of discipline, a medically useful space was born.'[45]

2.3.2 'Anatomo-politics of the human body'

The anatomo-politics of the human body was the earliest form of biopower according to Foucault. It 'centred on the body as a machine.'[46] With regard to healthcare, this meant that the biological functions of individual bodies were investigated and corrected on the basis of the norm of health.

Various examples of the anatomo-politics of the human body with regard to healthcare can for instance be found in his lectures about the formation of notions of abnormality in the history of modern society.[47] In these lectures Foucault examines how the practice of medicine interacted with the juridical branch in constituting the abnormality of individuals. Foucault illustrates this by describing the political reaction to the plague in the seventeenth and eighteenth century: 'The reaction to plague is a positive reaction; it is a reaction of inclusion, observation, the formation of knowledge, the multiplication of effects of power on the basis of the accumulation of observations and knowledge.'[48] Plague victims were in this period of time according to Foucault not excluded, but included in society. Their behaviour was disciplined so that they could be observed and so that knowledge about them could be obtained individually.[49] Plague victims were for instance registered, routinely examined and the course of a disease was recorded by the officials of a town. The increased control over their behaviour and the assignment of abnormality to them consequently made possible and justified collecting more knowledge about them. Knowledge formation about victims of the plague justified

---

[45] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 144.

[46] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139.

[47] Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974-1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003).

[48] Foucault, *Abnormal,* 50.

[49] Foucault, *Abnormal,* 31-54.

control over their behaviour and control over their behaviour made knowledge about them possible.

2.3.3 'Bio-politics of the population'

Foucault understood 'bio-politics of the population' as a biopower that 'focused on the species body.'[50] With regard to healthcare, health was no longer only thought of as a norm for individual bodies, but something that could be applied to the population as a whole.[51] The health of a population was for instance measured by examining the average longevity and the mortality rate of the population. Power consequently was not exercised on the basis of a fixed norm of health, but a norm that was deduced from the nature of the population. Foucault gives the new practice of inoculation in the eighteenth century as an example of this.[52] With inoculation a small amount of a certain disease was introjected into the body of a person to make him immune to the disease. This practice was accompanied by a certain risk. Especially old and weak people could get ill as a result of inoculation. Governments consequently calculated which people in the population carried the highest risk for becoming sick due to inoculation and which groups were safe to inoculate, and weighted the risks against the benefits. Government was in this case thus not focussed on the health of individual bodies, but based on norms that were derived from the population as a whole.

Foucault traces one of the origins of medical knowledge about the population as a whole in the emergence of the medical hospital in the eighteenth century.[53] The systemic organization of medical records in hospitals and their comparison with other hospitals made it possible to study health and diseases common to the population: 'Thanks to hospital technology, the individual and the population present themselves at the same time as objects of knowledge and

---

[50] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139.

[51] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 139-145.

[52] Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 83-110.

[53] Michel Foucault, "The Incorporation of the Hospital into Modern Technology," in *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, ed. Jeremy W. Crampton and Stuart Elden, trans. Edgar Knowlton Jr. et al. (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007).

medical intervention.'[54] He notices that during the second half of the eighteenth century such medical knowledge was centralized and organized.[55]

Foucault gives multiple descriptions of how medical knowledge about the population consequently became part of strategies of power. With regard to this he describes for instance the emergence of a 'politics of health' in the period of 1720-1800. He mentions two characteristics of this politics of health. First of all, medicine was partially separated from general aid to the poor. This was the result of a rationalization of welfare assistance in this period. Instead of being a general moral obligation for the rich, care for the poor became subject to careful calculation: 'Illness with respect to the imperatives of work and the necessity of production began to appear within this utilitarian analysis of poverty.'[56]Another characteristic of the politics of health according to Foucault is that during this period 'the public good' became an important objective of states. This public good consisted among other things of 'the natural resources, manufactured goods, their distribution, the extent of commerce, but also the development of cities and roads, living conditions (housing, nourishment, etc.), the number of inhabitants, their longevity, their health, and their aptitude for work.'[57] The result of these processes was the constitution of a system which was able to take responsibility for the ill and which allowed 'the perpetual observation, measuring, and improvement of a "state of health" of the population, in which illness is only one dependent variable in a long series of factors.'[58]

In another lecture Foucault describes how health was from the eighteenth century increasingly seen as something that concerned the society as a whole.[59] He

---

[54] Foucault, "The Incorporation of the Hospital into Modern Technology," 151.

[55] Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended"*, 181.

[56] Michel Foucault, "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century," *Foucault Studies*, no. 18, trans. Richard A. Lynch (Summer 2014): 115-116.

[57] Foucault, "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century," 116.

[58] Foucault, "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century," 117-118.

[59] Michel Foucault, "The Birth of Social Medicine," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2015).

relates this to the birth of social medicine. He distinguishes 'three stages of the formation of social medicine': state medicine, urban medicine and labour force medicine.[60] State medicine, which developed in Germany in the beginning of the eighteenth century, appropriated health as a way to strengthen the state internally. Urban medicine took shape in reaction to problems of urbanization in France at the end of the eighteenth century with regard to public hygiene. The last stage in the formation of social medicine was according to Foucault the development of labour force medicine in England during the nineteenth century. Labour force medicine sought, among other things, 'a control of the health and the bodies of the needy classes, to make them more fit for labour and less dangerous to the wealthy classes.'[61]

Foucault notes that the power-knowledge of medicine subsequently became very important in the nineteenth century. He relates this to the fact that the power-knowledge of medicine acted on both the individual body and the population as a whole: 'Given these conditions, you can understand how and why a technical knowledge such as medicine, or rather the combination of medicine and hygiene, is in the nineteenth century, if not the most important element, an element of considerable importance because of the link it establishes between scientific knowledge of both biological and organic processes (or in other words, the population and the body), and because, at the same time, medicine becomes a political intervention-technique with specific power-effects.'[62]

The occurrence of a disease could for instance be measured throughout the population.[63] This data could subsequently be compared with other variables, for instance it was examined in what sense the spread of the disease was correlated with socio-economic status and living conditions. On the basis of this knowledge it could be determined on which individuals a state had to intervene. Through this continual exchange between knowledge about individual bodies and knowledge about the

---

[60] Foucault, "The Birth of Social Medicine," 134-156.

[61] Foucault, "The Birth of Social Medicine," 155.

[62] Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended"*, 252.

[63] Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 83-110.

population as a whole a wide variety of variables could be uncovered that had an effect on health. The consequence was according to Foucault that constantly new elements were being integrated in the domain of state government.[64]

2.3.4 Healthcare and liberalism

The third form of biopower that is visible in Foucault's work can be found in his analysis of liberalism. Foucault defined liberalism as a specific art of government, which is based on the maxim that the government always governs too much. A government consequently tries to achieve its goals by governing as effective as possible by relying on the will and rationality of the individuals themselves. This definition of liberalism illuminates two seemingly contradictory developments in the history of healthcare with regard to power and life in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

On the one hand, the power-knowledge of medicine became during the nineteenth and twentieth century more and more prevalent in Western society. The medical sciences acquired an increasing amount of knowledge about the mechanisms of life. The norms that were derived from this knowledge consequently were increasingly included in governmental policies. Healthcare was integrated into a wide variety of domains in society, such as sexuality, psychology and criminality. In a lecture Foucault noted that it had almost become impossible to escape the power-knowledge of the medical sciences: 'When one wishes to object to medicine's deficiencies, its drawbacks and its harmful effects, this is done in the name of a more complete, more refined and widespread medical knowledge.'[65]

However, on the other hand, the modern state seems to have withdrawn itself with regard to intervention on the health of its citizen after the 1950s. Foucault mentions three ways in which modern medicine became structured around individual choice. He notes first of all that the right to health was formulated in this period.[66] The right to health for the individual was however not given to strengthen

---

[64] Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 45.

[65] Foucault, "The Crisis of Medicine or the Crisis of Antimedicine?," 14.

[66] Foucault, "The Crisis of Medicine or the Crisis of Antimedicine?," 6.

the state as a whole – as was the case in the eighteenth century – but it had to benefit the individual. Secondly, a new individualistic morality arose in this period according to Foucault: 'It was no longer a question of an obligation to practise cleanliness and hygiene in order to enjoy good health, but of the right to be sick as one wishes and as is necessary.'[67] Finally, during the twentieth century health increasingly became an object of individual consumption according to Foucault: 'Health becomes a consumer object, which can be produced by pharmaceutical laboratories, doctors, etc., and consumed by both potential and actual patients.'[68]

Foucault's analysis of liberalism, I hold, connects these seemingly contradictory developments.[69] The biopolitical nature of healthcare has not been diminished since the 1950s. The main place of the power-knowledge of medicine has however become the subjectivity of individuals themselves. From a young age citizens are made conscious of the importance of health and people adapt themselves to the rationality and regimes of healthcare. I would argue that this tendency has increased due to privatization and commercialization of the domain of healthcare, in which healthcare professions, organizations and companies act according to profit-principles. The power-knowledge of medicine thus expands because companies may create extra demand for healthcare through, for instance, marketing and research on health.

2.4 A critical assessment

To what extent can a useful biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare be constructed on the basis of Foucault's work? Foucault never formulated a definitive theory of power, let alone a theory of biopower, let alone a biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare. I hope however that I have sufficiently demonstrated that a consistent, cohesive and even illuminating biopolitical framework for the

---

[67] Foucault, "The Crisis of Medicine or the Crisis of Antimedicine?," 6.

[68] Foucault, "The Crisis of Medicine or the Crisis of Antimedicine?," 16.

[69] This analysis is the result of applying Foucault's general conception of liberalism to the domain of healthcare. However, he seems to follow a similar logic with regard to liberalism and health. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 269-286.

history of healthcare can be deduced from Foucault's work. The main advantage of Foucault's thought for such a framework is his conception of power and knowledge. I think that Foucault convincingly shows that power and knowledge are closely intertwined in the history of healthcare.

Many things become apparent with regard to the history of healthcare on the basis of Foucault's work. Foucault shows first of all that throughout the history of healthcare medical knowledge has proven to be an important instrument for strategies of power. Another thing that he makes clear is that medical knowledge shapes strategies of power. The medical sciences disclose the biological mechanisms of the human body and the population. They offer people new possibilities to understand themselves: as an aggregate of biological functions that can be altered. Health is a norm according to which both the individual body and the population as a whole are consequently regularized. Finally, Foucault's work on biopolitics makes clear that technologies of power are important for the transformations in the history of healthcare. Bodies were first systematically individualized and examined in disciplines such as schools, hospitals, and military barracks, which paved the way for knowledge about the population from the medical sciences. The power-technology of biopolitics consequently replaced the sovereign model of power, because it proved to be more successful for control over subjects. Foucault's analysis of liberalism furthermore shows that the medicalization in modern society on the one hand and the individualization of healthcare on the other hand are connected as a form power-knowledge. The growth of medical knowledge about the mechanisms of our biological life went hand in hand with more possibilities to control life and the distribution of norms about how life could be made healthier. In the case of liberalism, people made these norms and the rationality behind healthcare their own. Modern subjects thus largely govern themselves according to the power-knowledge of medicine.

However, a biopolitical framework based on the work of Foucault is defective for a few reasons. Foucault analyses historical reality in a way that differs considerably from how we normally describe the world. This makes his writings often difficult to comprehend. We tend to interpret the behaviour and actions of

people on the basis of their individual rationality and intentions. Foucault instead tries to find the intentionality behind a complex of relations in a society and he interprets the agency of individuals primarily as expressions of these relations. He interprets the knowledge of medicine for instance as a collection of statements and procedures that follow a certain strategy to change bodies according to the norms in a society.

Foucault's analyses of power furthermore essentially describe the way conduct of subjects is unconsciously guided by other subjects. Naturally, this approach tends to minimize two aspects that are often invoked in the writing of history: the agency of the subject itself and contingency in history. One objection to Foucault's analyse is that, though healthcare practices are dependent on the knowledge, norms and power relations in a society, a healthcare professional has a certain agency of its own. A Foucauldian biopolitical framework tends to erase idiosyncrasies, autonomous thinking and free will of individual subjects from the books of history. Another objection I would make against Foucault's metaphysics of power is that it often seems to imply necessity with regard to the course of history. Foucault argues for instance that biopolitics naturally replaced the sovereign exercise of power, because this technology of power promised a more effective means of control over subjects. In these instances it seems that Foucault imposes a general theory of power on the past, a theory that is unfalsifiable and which he simply keeps on verifying with historical sources. This approach threatens to ignore the contingent and unique nature of historical events.

To conclude, I think that the biopolitical legacy of Foucault offers a rich collection of analytical tools to study the history of healthcare. But Foucault's work is perhaps too fragmented, too idiosyncratic and it contains too many transformations in thought for an all-encompassing framework. A Foucauldian framework furthermore tends to minimize the agency of subjects and the contingency of history. His work therefore seems to be more suitable as a rich collection of analyses which may provide inspiration and starting points for new historical research.

3. Giorgio Agamben

In this chapter I examine if a useful biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare can be constructed on the basis of the work of Giorgio Agamben. First I explicate the methodology I use. Secondly, I explain Agamben's analysis of biopolitics. After this I apply Agamben's biopolitical analysis to the history of healthcare. In the last section I evaluate to what extent Agamben's work can be useful for a framework for the history of healthcare.

3.1 Methodology

Giorgio Agamben investigated the notion of biopolitics in the so-called *Homo sacer* series. The first book of the series – *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* – was first published in 1995.[70] The first book of the series has been the main source for my analysis of Agamben's work. Agamben develops his conception of biopolitics in this book. The other parts of the series are mainly elaborations, clarifications and expansions of the basic argumentation in this book. Though *Sovereign Power and Bare Life* has been my main point of reference, I have used other books of the series – *State of Exception*[71] and *The Use of Bodies*[72] – when they provided useful elaborations.

Agamben does not directly engage in a complete biopolitical analysis of healthcare. He only describes a few cases in which the biopolitical nature of modern medicine is exemplified.[73] However, a few conclusions for the history of healthcare can be deduced from his main analysis. As was the case in the previous chapter, I have tried to explicate and understand the main assumptions of the philosopher with regard to biopolitics. Secondly, I have placed the explicit statements he made about the history of healthcare in this general framework. The goal is to construct a

---

[70] Agamben, *Homo Sacer.*

[71] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception,* trans. Kevin Attell (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2005).

[72] Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[73] Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* 136-160.

cohesive framework for the history of healthcare that conforms to Agamben's analysis of biopolitics.

3.2 Agamben's understanding of biopolitics

3.2.1 Sovereignty, the law and bare life

Agamben states that he aims 'to correct or at least complete' Foucault's notion of biopolitics.[74] He disagrees with Foucault's statement that biopolitics is a modern phenomenon that is at odds with the older sovereign exercise of power. Agamben states that 'the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.'[75] This claim rests first of all upon his specific understanding of sovereignty and the law in Western society.

Agamben notes that every law requires for its application the definition of a regular situation.[76] I will give an example. A certain law for instance states that all murderers have to go to jail. When somebody is said to have killed a person and he is brought to court, the general rule of law is applied to the specific case. If it is established that the person is indeed a murderer, he will consequently go to jail. In its general formulation, the law thus constitutes a distinctive part of reality to which it is applied. Agamben argues: 'The law has a regulative character and is a "rule" not because it commands and proscribes, but because it must first of all create the sphere of its own reference in real life and *make that reference regular.*'[77] For instance, if a law prescribes that everyone who commits homicide goes to jail, a 'sphere' has to be created of what homicide means: a collection of concrete cases of homicide.

Agamben consequently argues that it is the exception that gives significance to the rule of law. When a factual situation accords with the rule of law, it is not necessary to invoke it. Laws are the result of decisions on what are considered to be exceptions to the juridical order. A factual situation is included in the law as an

---

[74] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9.

[75] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.

[76] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 15-29.

[77] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 26.

exclusion to the juridical order: '(…) a fact is included in the juridical order through its exclusion, and transgression seems to precede and determine the lawful case.'[78] For instance, a law that prohibits homicide excludes all instances of homicide from the juridical order. Homicide is included in the law by its exclusion from the juridical order. The rule that homicide is forbidden consequently implies that 'not-killing someone' is lawful. The law thus expands by the decision on what must be considered exceptions to its rules. For instance, it may also be decided that if someone kills out of pure necessity or self-defence, he does not have to go to jail. Such a person is consequently regarded as an exception to the rule that everyone who commits homicide must go to jail. A new case is thus included in the law as an exception. It is for this reason that Agamben states that: 'In this sense, the exception is the originary form of law.'[79]

Following the German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt, Agamben defines the sovereign as the one 'who decides on the exception.'[80] The sovereign is the one who decides which cases must be included as exclusions into the law. He writes that '(…) the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order.'[81] In the aforementioned example, the sovereign referred to the law that everyone who commits homicide must go to jail, but also decided that the particular case had to be regarded as an exception to it. Agamben mentions situations in which states implement emergency measures due to a state of emergency as extreme examples of these decisions on the exception.[82] In these cases the normal operation of law is suspended as to make it possible to implement measures that were originally illegal. Agamben calls this a state of exception. These measures do not stand alone from the law, they are included by exclusion from the normal rule of law: 'The rule applies to the exception in no longer applying, in withdrawing from it. The state of exception is thus not the chaos that precedes order but rather the

---

[78] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 26.

[79] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 26.

[80] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 15-29.

[81] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12.

[82] Agamben, *State of Exception*, 1-31.

situation that results from its suspension.'[83]

Agamben subsequently characterizes the relation of exception as a relation of ban. When the sovereign decides that a certain group of people should be regarded as an exception to the rule of law, the people that were inside the juridical order are abandoned by the law. They are not simply put outside the law, they are affected by the juridical order precisely to the extent that it no longer applies to them.[84] A person who is banned from the juridical order is affected by it to the extent that he relied on the law to survive, for instance with regard to protection and the use of utilities. Everyone inside a political community is thus vulnerable to the decisions of the sovereign to the extent that they may be excepted by him and become abandoned by the law.

Agamben notes that every law in its determinations always refers, directly or indirectly, to the life of humans.[85] In a state of exception it is thus always 'life' that has been abandoned by the law. Agamben furthermore states that Western politics is founded upon a specific subdivision of life that originates in Ancient Greece. He argues that the Greeks used two words to express what we mean by the word 'life.' The word *zoē* referred to 'the simple fact of living common to all living beings' and *bios* indicated 'the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.'[86] It is not always clear what Agamben exactly means with *zoē* and *bios*. He generally refers to *zoē* as all aspects of our life that we naturally have in common with animals. These are more or less the biological functions of our body. *Bios* corresponds to the particular forms of life which are formed by the cultural traditions and political practices inside a political community.

Agamben furthermore notes that Aristotle stated that the political community – the polis – was the only place where a good life could be attained. Agamben argues that *zoē* was consequently only included in the political sphere of Ancient Greece as an exception: 'almost as if politics were the place in which life

---

[83] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 18.

[84] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 28.

[85] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 46.

[86] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1.

had to transform itself into good life (…).'[87] Agamben names the *zoē* that is excepted by a sovereign 'bare life'. As an exception, this life is abandoned by the law and to this extent exposed to death. An example of bare life which is according to Agamben paradigmatic for it is the figure of the *homo sacer*.[88] In Roman law a *homo sacer* was a person who was banned and who could therefore be killed without punishment, but who could not be sacrificed in a religious ritual. The *homo sacer* thus exemplifies a double abandonment of life with regard to the law, because both homicide and sacrifice presume a life that is inside the (religious) rules of a society. The law thus only referred to the *homo sacer* with regard to its bare life: as simple natural life (*zoē*) – being killable – abandoned by the law.

On the basis of his understanding of sovereignty and his analysis of the specific subdivision in Western political thought between *zoē* and *bios*, Agamben concludes that the production of bare life is 'the fundamental activity of sovereign power' in Western society.[89] In Western society the political community is according to Agamben founded upon excepting the simple natural life (*zoē)* in the law and the sovereign decides on this exception. Consequently, when the citizenship is for instance taken away from someone or denied by the sovereign, the law only relates to him as biological life (*zoē*). An example of this situation is that a refugee may receive aid from a state for sustaining his biological life, but that his particular way of life is not taken into account.[90]

3.2.2 Agamben's view on the biopolitical nature of modernity

Though Agamben disagrees with Foucault's claim that biopolitics is a modern phenomenon, he does assign a specific biopolitical significance to modernity. First of all, Agamben states that the separation that was made in Ancient Greece between *bios* and *zoē* has disappeared in modernity: 'In any case, however, the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the polis – the politicization of bare life as such – constitutes the

---

[87] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.

[88] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 71-74.

[89] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181.

[90] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 131-135.

decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought.'[91] In the political community of Ancient Greece simple natural life (*zoē*) was according to Agamben thought to belong exclusively to the private sphere, only *bios* was allowed in the polis. For instance, procreation and other biological qualities of the citizen were thought to have no place in the public decision making of the polis. Agamben claims that modern politics no longer makes this distinction. All simple natural life (*zoē*) is in modern nation states subject to the decisions of state politics and all politically qualified life (*bios*) is governed on the basis of its natural biological characteristics.

Agamben gives multiple explanations for how the separation between *zoē* and *bios* has disappeared in modernity. First of all, he notes that the birth of modern nation states gave all people that were born in a nation the rights of a citizen: they all were included as *bios*.[92] The state was thereby also made responsible for the biological life of each citizen, from birth till death. Examples of these rights are the rights to work, happiness, health and education. Such aspects of the life of all citizens were thus politicized, in the sense that the way these rights were cared for – through laws – was a result of political debate. The care for these rights was however done on the basis of the simple natural life (*zoē)* of the citizens. For instance, to guarantee the health of its citizens, the state took measures that were based on biological information about them. Another explanation Agamben gives for the disappearance of the separation between *zoē* and *bios* in modernity is the emergence of biology and the medical sciences.[93] These sciences reduced according to Agamben all political life (*bios*) to simple natural life (*zoē*). Citizens were understood on the basis of objectively measurable biological qualities. This knowledge about simple natural life – about for instance life expectancy, physical health and psychological well-being – is in modernity moreover immediately translated into political regulation.

---

[91] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 4.

[92] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 126-135.

[93] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 3-4.

Agamben furthermore states that the state of exception in modernity increasingly has become the rule.[94] He argues that state of exception used to be only invoked in emergency situations, for instance when the nation was thought to be in danger. Under modern liberal democracy the state of exception has however become the rule according to Agamben. He relates this to the expansion of the executive branch during World War I and World War II. The executive power increasingly relied on decrees and measures that have the force of law.[95] Modern politics consequently operates increasingly independent of the law. Agamben mentions a military order issued by the president of the United States in 2001 as an example. This act of the executive branch authorized according to Agamben 'the "indefinite detention" and trial by "military commissions" (…).'[96]

As a consequence of these two developments – the gradual disappearance of the separation between *zoē* and *bios*, and the state of exception increasingly becoming the rule – all life in Western society has according to Agamben virtually become bare life. Agamben writes: '(…) the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and zoē, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.'[97] All life is – simultaneously with regard to its biological and political aspects – completely included in the political sphere. Because the state of exception has become the rule, it is furthermore continuously abandoned by the law.

The extreme consequences of this situation – the situation in which 'the realm of bare life coincides with the political realm' and 'the exception becomes the rule' – was according to Agamben visible in the German concentration camps.[98] The biological aspects of people in these camps were completely politicized and

---

[94] Agamben, *State of Exception*.

[95] Agamben, *State of Exception*, 6-7.

[96] Agamben, *State of Exception*, 3-4.

[97] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9.

[98] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 166-180.

politics determined the 'biology' of them. The fact that they were considered to be a certain 'race' had immediate political consequences. They were for instance stripped of their citizenship. However, the biological classifications the German physicians made – about the simple natural life of for instance the Jewish inhabitants – were political constructs. To make the camps possible, the normal juridical order was suspended for them during an emergency situation that lasted until the end of the Third Reich. Because these people were, as exceptions, placed outside the juridical order, they could, similarly to the *homo sacer,* be killed without punishment. Precisely because the life of these people had from birth till death already been completely included into the German state – without making the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* – they could so easily be placed outside the protection of the law. As an exception to the law, the life of these people was consequently at the mercy of the sovereign power of the camp guards. Agamben thus argues that in the camps the exception had become the rule: 'The camp is thus the structure in which the state of exception – the possibility of deciding on which founds sovereign power – is realized *normally*.'[99]

3.3 A biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare

In the previous sections I explicated Agamben's understanding of biopolitics. In this section I describe how a biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare can be constructed on the basis of it. First I analyse the place of healthcare within Agamben's general understanding of sovereignty, the law and bare life. Secondly, I connect it with his analysis of the biopolitical nature of modernity.

3.3.1 Health and the good life

How can Agamben's analysis of biopolitics be applied to the history of healthcare? Agamben has not explicitly written about healthcare in his biopolitical work, but I think that health can be understood as a form of the good life. Health is an ideal state that people strive towards and the political community is generally thought to

---

[99] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 170.

be the place where this good life can be attained. With the notion of health, the people in a political community separate and oppose themselves to their own simple natural life (*zoē*) and institute a particular way of living (*bios)*. For instance, medical professionals examine the bodies of the citizens and develop knowledge about the biological mechanisms of these bodies. Medicine thus approaches the citizens as simple natural life (*zoē*). A political community may consequently decide to adopt a particular way of living (*bios*) to foster the health of the citizens, such as hygienic measures or the prohibition of unhealthy substances. These forms or ways of living to achieve the good life of health is what we call healthcare.[100]

In Western society healthcare regulations are generally codified in the law and the medically examined simple natural life is as such thus included in the political sphere. The sovereign decides on the exception of the law and the life that is included in the healthcare-system of a political community is in this way, as bare life, also exposed to death. For instance, certain people need medication to survive and this medication is given to them because of the healthcare-laws in the society. When the sovereign of the political community decides that this group of people must be considered as exceptions to these laws, they are literally exposed to death. They are – *as homines sacri* – abandoned by the law.

3.3.2 Healthcare and modernity

To reiterate, the rupture Agamben distinguishes in modernity is that the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* has disappeared and that, because the exception has become the rule, all life is constantly vulnerable to the sovereign exception.

With regard to healthcare, Agamben mentions the eugenic policies in the National Socialist Reich as an extreme example of the biopolitical nature of modernity. In the measuring and improvement of the 'health' of the German people, all biological life had political implications and biological classifications were a product of politics. Agamben argues however that this fusion between politics and biology is present in all modern nation states: 'The fact is that the National Socialist

---

[100] In this case I use the informal definition of healthcare as the collection of all activities aimed at improving health in a society.

Reich marks the point at which the integration of medicine and politics, which is one of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics, began to assume its final form. This implies that the sovereign decision on bare life comes to be displaced from strictly political motivations and areas to a more ambiguous terrain in which the physician and the sovereign seem to exchange roles.'[101]

The mechanisms of the body which the medical sciences argue constitute health are immediately political because health is one of the rights that modern nation states constitutionally guarantee their citizens. All simple natural life (*zoē*) born in the modern nation state is consequently immediately, till its death, included in the healthcare system of a society and becomes as such immediately politically qualified life (*bios*). However, modern nation states have to divide the money they invest in the research and treatment of different diseases. Medical research and classifications with regard to healthy biological life have consequently become important for political decision making. Healthcare is in modern states generally publicly financed and decisions on the distribution of healthcare are thus a matter of politics. Through democratic political discussions it is established how the funding for medical research and medical treatment is divided. In these cases 'the physician and the sovereign seem to exchange roles.'

Agamben argues that biopolitics – politics over life – always immediately implies politics over death. He calls this thanatopolitics.[102] This is especially the case in the domain of healthcare where the preservation and improvement of life and the postponement of death are the main objectives. Due to the limited amount of resources in a society, the state always has to make choices about which life it wants to improve. I will give an example. A government has to balance its healthcare spending between – among others – care for the elderly and children with birth defects. Each choice benefits one group more than another group. The flipside is that the this distribution of life therefore simultaneously implies a distribution of death. To prioritize the development of medicine for the children

---

[101] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 143.

[102] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 122.

with birth defects in this example leads to a relative growth of old people dying. In these decisions, life can – to the extent that it is included in the law with regard to the right of health – also be abandoned by the law.

3.4 A critical assessment

To what extent can Agamben's understanding of biopolitics be useful for a framework for the history of healthcare? Adopting Agamben's distinctions for a framework for the history of healthcare is useful in highlighting some key historical transformations. Though developments in medicine and health provisions offer new ways for people to be free from natural constraints, Agamben's analysis makes clear that this comes at the cost of a dependence of our life on political decision making. On the basis of Agamben's biopolitical framework, the main narrative in the history of healthcare seems to be that life has become increasingly at the mercy of the sovereign in the political community.

However, a biopolitical framework based on the work of Agamben is defective for a few reasons. Agamben reduces Western political thought to the distinctions that are made in certain, albeit important, political texts in history. He hardly gives any evidence that substantiates his claim that the *zoē/bios* division is foundational for all the rest of Western political thought. It seems more plausible that Agamben projects his own contemporary notions of 'life,' 'politics' and 'sovereignty' onto certain political treatises, thereby creating an artificial unity and continuity between them. Agamben furthermore neglects the mediating aspects of society in politics. He constructs a strict dichotomy between politics, understood in respect to the logic of sovereignty and the law, and life. As a consequence of this dichotomy, he neglects the ways in which different groups can express their views and shape their life independently from politics and how they can exert pressure on politics through civic institutions. Agamben's claim that politics essentially creates 'bare' defenceless life is one-sided. Politics could be analysed, as Foucault does, as a complex whole of power struggles. If one adds this to the equation, Agamben's main concerns – about an uncontrolled force of power that directly acts on bare life, as in the camps – seems less urgent.

Finally, I think that Agamben's thesis that in modernity the state of exception has become the rule is exaggerated. His main argument for this claim is the growth of the executive branch in modern liberal democracies. Since World War II, at least in Europe and in a lot of other countries in the world, the influence of checks and balances that monitor sovereign power, such as the juridical branch, a free press and a civil society, has increased. Furthermore, the growing importance of international law and treatises have also reduced the occurrence of a state of exception.

4. Roberto Esposito

In this chapter I examine if a useful biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare can be constructed on the basis of the work of the philosopher Roberto Esposito. As with the previous chapters, I begin by explicating the way I have made use of Esposito's work. Secondly, I explain Esposito's understanding of biopolitics and look at how this can be applied for constructing a framework for the history of healthcare. Just like with Foucault and Agamben, I describe the biopolitical significance that Esposito attributes to modernity and how this can be related to the history of healthcare. In the final section I evaluate to what extent Esposito's work can be useful for a biopolitical framework for the history of healthcare.

4.1 Methodology

Roberto Esposito's work about biopolitics is – compared to the work of Foucault and Agamben – relatively unknown in academia. The reasons for this are probably that his work is relatively recent, that some of his books are not yet translated from Italian and that a good understanding of his thought often requires a familiarity with the work of other – not all that easy – philosophers. Esposito developed the core of his biopolitical thought in his immunity-trilogy.[103] In one chapter of *Immunitas* Esposito explicitly reflects on the historical development of healthcare and how he understands this development with regard to his paradigm of immunity.[104] His reasoning in this chapter can only be fully understood within the context of his broader philosophical project in which he attempts to reinterpret some of the main political categories of modernity. I will first explicate the main assumptions of his philosophical project and connect this to his observations about the history of healthcare in *Immunitas*.

---

[103] This trilogy consists of the books *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* and *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*.

[104] Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 122-144.

4.2 Esposito's understanding of biopolitics

4.2.1 Community and immunity

Roberto Esposito's ideas on biopolitics can be seen as an attempt to synthesize two of the main traditions in biopolitics that followed after Foucault: a tradition that emphasized the power *over* life and a tradition that emphasized the power *of* life.[105] Esposito states that these two traditions give an incomplete understanding of the relation between power and life because each of them prioritizes one element over the other.

On the one hand, philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben emphasize political power *over* life. In Agamben's analysis of sovereignty, life is increasingly at stake in political decisions. In his work life seems to be a passive object that political power increasingly seems to master. Other philosophers, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, on the other hand emphasize the vitality of life – the active force of life – over political power. They emphasize the power *of* life. For instance, instead of being increasingly subjected to state power, Hardt and Negri argue that different people all over the world can, independently of state boundaries, form various communities around their commonality. They argue that people can take on ways of living independent from the hegemonic power-relations in the world. In other words, for them life always partly escapes political power and the distribution of power follows the dynamic of life.

Roberto Esposito attempts to synthesize the two opposing traditions in biopolitics – power of life and power over life – with his paradigm of immunity.[106] Instead of prioritizing one over the other, he argues that life and power are the constituent elements of a larger community-immunity dynamic. To understand this, it is first necessary to explain the immunity relation. An organism is immune to a certain disease when it is able to resist it, for instance by preventing the development of the pathogenic microorganism of the disease. In the case of

---

[105] Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xix-xxvi.

[106] Esposito, *Bios*, 45-56.

vaccination, an extremely small unharmful amount of, for instance, the measles are put inside the blood stream of a child. The body of the child then isolates the measles in a controlled environment and subsequently it is able to develop the specific antipathogens to annihilate the disease. Consequently the child is for the rest of his life immune to the disease. The child is protected against the measles because the body has learned to recognize the disease and is able to take the appropriate measures. This dynamic – of a body that introjects a negative element to heighten its chance for survival in the long run – also characterizes the relation between life and power according to Esposito. In the biopolitical relation, however, not the body of an individual is at the centre, but a political community.

To make this clear, it is first necessary to explain Esposito's characterization of community.[107] Instead of understanding a community as a group of people who share a certain property, he argues that community must be understood as a dynamic. Esposito argues that the essential meaning of community – of what defines a community – is reciprocal gift-giving, or more precisely: a gift that demands a return.[108] Esposito writes: 'The subjects of community are united by an "obligation," in the sense that we say "I owe *you* something," but not "you owe *me* something."'[109] The community of a nation state is for instance constituted on the basis of a continuous sharing of a posed history, language and the obligation to follow certain laws. A continuous gift is demanded from the citizen that is part of it. It might for instance be demanded from citizens that they speak a certain language, follow certain cultural traditions and obey the laws of the state. This reciprocal gift-giving is what according to Esposito defines and upholds the community.

This strengthening of the community through reciprocal gift-giving is according to Esposito potentially never-ending. There can always be put more aspects of the members of the community in common. For instance, the community

---

[107] Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community,* trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[108] Esposito, *Communitas*, 1-19.

[109] Esposito, *Communitas*, 6.

of a nation state may initially be founded upon only a common language and history. However, eventually the community may also demand that the members share money, common festivities, education and ethnicity. Consequently, what it means to be for instance part of the Dutch, French or German national community is a sum of more and more demands.

Esposito argues that immunity is the mechanism by which a community may protect itself from the inherent risks of too much community.[110] For a community to make progress, to adapt for instance to new circumstances, immunity is a necessary strategy. For instance, by instituting the right to freedom of speech and thought a community guarantees that individuals in the community are able to develop their own opinions and are able to criticize the community. They are exempted from all sharing exactly the same opinions and ideas. This immunization serves the community, since freedom of thought and speech make it possible for members to criticize weaknesses and defects in the community.

Esposito interprets politics or political power as something that mediates between the process of putting in common and the immunization in a community. Through politics it is established what aspects of life are left open to individual choice and freedom and which aspects must be governed by rules or determinations that apply to everyone just the same. Esposito therefore argues that biopolitics is as old as communities exist: 'Contrary to what is presupposed in the concept of biopolitics – understood as the result of an encounter that arises at a certain moment between the two components – in this perspective no power exists external to life, just as life is never given outside relations of power. From this angle, politics is nothing other than the possibility or the instrument for keeping life alive [in vita la vita].'[111]

Esposito argues that the dynamic of community-immunity is 'coextensive with the entire history of civilization.'[112] The ability to put things in common – to

---

[110] Esposito, *Bios,* 52.

[111] Esposito, *Bios,* 46.

[112] Esposito, *Bios,* 46-56.

share – is a necessary condition for the existence of human life. Every person relies on common rules, education and practices that help him structure his life and that make it possible to develop a useful strategy for coping with an otherwise uncontrollable, chaotic and deadly world. The process of immunization is in this sense the logical by-product of community. By instituting common practices, a community may for example also immunize itself at the same time from the rules of other communities.

4.2.2 Esposito's view on the biopolitical nature of modernity

Because Esposito states that the relation between power and life is part of a broader community-immunity dynamic, he argues that biopolitics is as old as communities exist. Esposito nevertheless assigns – just like Foucault and Agamben – a special significance to modernity. The self-defensive requirement of life through politics became according to Esposito in modernity identified not just as a given but 'as both a problem and a strategic option.'[113] The threat that life poses to itself by an excess of community and the consequent need to immunize became according to Esposito an explicit subject of political thought in modernity.

Esposito poses that modern political notions – such as liberty, property and the theorization of sovereignty – can all be seen as explicit immunity-strategies against an excess of community. He argues that these notions were invented in modernity to protect individual life from too much community. For instance, he points to the fact that sovereignty was theorized by Thomas Hobbes as a solution to the self-destructiveness of the state of nature of all against all.[114] Hobbes argued that by nature humans have conflicting needs and impulses. The historical solution to this problem was according to Hobbes that sovereignty was attributed to a part of the community, for instance the king. The sovereign is put outside the normal obligations and mutual exchanges in the community to make the preservation of it possible. A war of all against all is prevented because all subject their will to the will of the sovereign.

---

[113] Esposito, *Bios*, 54.

[114] Esposito, *Bios*, 57-63.

Esposito also discerns a 'second' phase in modernity that is also linked to the process of immunization: 'The underlying difference, recognizable in biopolitical terms, resides in the fact that in the classic modern age the immunitary relationship between politics and the preservation of life was still mediated or filtered by a paradigm of order that was articulated in the concepts of sovereignty, representation, and individual rights. In the second phase (which through various steps takes us to today), however, that mediation diminishes in favour of a more immediate superimposition between politics and life.'[115] In classical modernity the relation between politics and life was according to Esposito still mediated with the concepts of sovereignty, representation, and individual rights. In second modernity, politics refers according to Esposito directly to life. For instance, in the first period a war was justified on the basis of the right to liberty. According to Esposito liberty indirectly referred to life in the sense that – to explain it shortly – it referred to the possibility of the life of the citizens to proliferate and to be free from the constraints that would hinder its development.[116] In second modernity politics is increasingly directly derived from life. Esposito mentions the politics of Nazi Germany as an extreme historical example in which political decisions were directly justified on the basis of biological life. According to the ideology of German National Socialism, politics only served to strengthen the life of the German people in its biological aspects and the killing of other 'races' was directly put in terms of defence of German life against the dangers of degeneration that those 'natural' enemies posed.[117]

Esposito furthermore argues that the immunization of life during modernity has gone so far that it increasingly endangers the existence of community itself. He states that modern political thought only relates to life through what negates it since it is never known what 'life' is positively. Because life is not known in itself, it always eventually tends to be at odds with the same categories that are instituted to

---

[115] Roberto Esposito, "Interview with Roberto Esposito," interview by Timothy Campbell and Anna Paparcone, *Diacritics* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 49-56, 55.

[116] Esposito, *Bios*, 69-77.

[117] Esposito, *Bios*, 110-145.

protect it: 'If modern political philosophy is given the task of protecting life, which is always determined negatively, then the political categories organized to express it will end up rebounding against their own proper meanings, twisting against themselves.'[118] For instance, the creation of the sovereign prevents – as a form of immunization – the inherent danger that different individual lives pose to each other and establishes stability and order in the community. However, the sovereign only negatively relates to life: as an immune response to the potential chaos and self-destructive tendency of life in the community. The decisions of the sovereign consequently eventually tend to be at odds with the life of the community itself, which remains undefined. For instance, the negative relation of the sovereign to life increasingly results in the subjection of life to it and this eventually poses a lethal danger to the vitality of the community. The Nazis, for instance, sovereignly kept on differentiating and separating life from life they considered unworthy of living. This ultimately even led to the result that Hitler decided that the German people as a whole were not worth living. He ordered the German people to commit suicide.[119] The fact that life was only approached negatively – as the survival of German life against inherently antagonistic life of others – led to a process of immunization by the sovereign that in a sense 'logically' led to self-destruction.

Esposito compares the self-destructive effect of too much immunization in a community to an auto-immune disease.[120] The immune system of an organism with an auto-immune disease is so active that it starts to become a danger for the functioning of the organism as a whole. It keeps on immunizing parts of the body, even parts that have to be connected to the rest of the body for survival. Esposito thinks that the increased urge for immunization in second modernity is in a sense a logical reaction to the perceived dangers that have arisen due to a more connected community in this period of time.[121] Esposito writes: '(…) as risk of the common becomes increasingly extensive, the response of the immune defence becomes

---

[118] Esposito, *Bios*, 56

[119] Esposito, *Bios*, 110-145.

[120] Esposito, *Bios*, 146-148.

[121] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 1-9.

increasingly intensive.'[122] Since modernity, the variety of ways in which people are (globally) connected has expanded exponentially. The internet, international transport and migration have made the exchange of ideas and products, but also of diseases and (images of) violence more extensive. As a consequence the immune response has according to Esposito become more intensive.[123] An example of this is a common attitude in modern politics towards immigrants. Immigrants are thought to bring a wide variety of possible risks – cultural, political, religious, biological, economical – to the community. The immunization of the community consequently becomes more intense – because politicians perceive a wide variety of risks with regard to only a small group of foreign people – by reinstituting very strict conditions and rules.

4.3 A framework for the history of healthcare

In the previous sections I explicated Esposito's understanding of biopolitics. In this section I describe how it can be applied to the history of healthcare. First I analyse the place of healthcare within Esposito's paradigm of immunity. Secondly, I connect it with his analysis of the biopolitical nature of modernity and second modernity.

4.3.1 Healthcare and the paradigm of immunity

In *Immunitas* Esposito makes clear that the relation of community-immunity between politics and life is also visible in the history of healthcare. This becomes clear when he points to the fact that both politics and medicine are historically structured around the metaphor of the body.[124] In medicine this is the biological body and in political thought this is the political body. Both bodies have been characterized as having an organic unity. The biological body is seen as a whole that is constituted by different organs whose different functions constitute the life of the body as a whole. The political body is similarly thought of as a unity in which

---

[122] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 3.

[123] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 1-5.

[124] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 112-120.

the individual members define the whole, while the whole – for instance the nation – also defines its members.

Esposito furthermore shows that both the political body and the biological body have always been defined on the basis of what were considered to be risks to them.[125] The first examinations, classifications and consequent interpretations of the biological body were products of solutions of doctors against what threatened the life of the body. Esposito writes: 'Of course, logically speaking, the physiological, or morphological, determination of the body precedes its pathology. But, in point of fact, its physiology and morphology derive their meaning from the layout of the pathological condition: what is healthy is only defined through contrast by the "decision" about what is diseased—the origin, development, and outcome of the illness.'[126] Esposito states that the origin of theoretical medicine thus lies in deducing from dead or diseased bodies the mechanisms that prevent them from functioning properly. This made visible what constitutes health. Esposito argues that the political body is similarly defined by the risks that are encountered: 'If, for example, the ultimate evil is identified in the threat of insurrections and rioting, the health of the State will be viewed as residing in an order guaranteed by the control of the head over the other parts of the body. If, on the contrary, what we fear instead is the tyranny of a despotic ruler, the salvation of the body politic will be located in a balanced equilibrium between its different members.'[127]

Esposito's analysis consequently offers a new way to look at the history of healthcare. On the one hand, healthcare always takes place inside a political body which is historically constituted, thought of and ordered on the basis of earlier perceived dangers. For instance, the body of a national state is constituted on the basis of the perceived common difference from other peoples and common practices that express their needs for living. However, healthcare is at the same time also centred around the biological body. The notion of the biological body is

---

[125] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 121-127.

[126] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 122.

[127] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 122.

constituted, thought of and ordered on the basis of earlier perceived dangers by medicine. The history of healthcare can in this sense be understood as a process in which humans immunize their bodies in two ways. They exempt both their individual bodies and the political body they are part of from the risks they perceive around them.

4.3.2 Healthcare and (second) modernity

The life and health of the body was according to Esposito – as I described in the previous section – already in a metaphoric sense at the core of Western political thought. However, starting from modernity, the body of citizens became according to Esposito not only the metaphoric, but also the real place for the exercise of political power.[128] Esposito refers to Foucault's work on biopolitics and describes how the knowledge of biology and medicine made the material life of the body an object of control of the political community. The result was according to Esposito the emergence of extensive state regulation with the goal of improving the health of the community: '(…) the issue of public health – understood in its most widest and most general sense as the "welfare" of the nation – clearly became the pivot around which the entire economic, administrative, and political affairs of the state revolved.'[129]

This explains according to him the growing political importance of medical knowledge in this period. Thus, '(…) the whole sphere of politics, law, and economics becomes a function of the qualitative welfare and quantitative increase of the population, considered purely in its biological aspect: life becomes government business, in all sense of the word, just as government becomes first and foremost the governance of life.'[130] Consequently, healthcare – which has the proper functioning of the material body as its objective – undergoes in his eyes a progressive expansion into domains that previously were outside the political sphere. This seems to agree with Esposito's more general statement about the

---

[128] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 135-140.

[129] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 138.

[130] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 138.

biopolitical nature of modernity: that the self-defensive requirement of life through politics became 'both a problem and a strategic option.'[131] Modern healthcare concerns itself with the political question of how the material biological aspects of the population can optimally be preserved and improved.

With regard to the auto-immunity dynamic of second modernity and healthcare, Esposito refers to French philosopher and physician Georges Canguilhem's understanding of health.[132] Canguilhem emphasized that the norm of a human organism coincides with the organism itself and that its vitality is dependent on the extent that it can adapt to its environment. Similarly, a healthy organism is measured by its willingness and capacity to encounter what is outside its norms and a sick organism is characterized by not being able to take risks. Norms which a community imposes on life with the law are by definition external to the intrinsic (a)-normativity of life. While law is by definition always formulated as a timeless and universal norm, life is precisely in its vitality defined by the ability to transcend norms: to change, adapt and grow. Opposed to Agamben, Esposito therefore states that bare life 'is not the object or effect of the norm, but the place of its invariance.'[133] Life that is put outside the norm of the law is invariant in relation to the changeless determinations of the law. However, bare life has only become anormative to the extent that it was put outside the law. The life of a group of people that is banned from a political community develops independently from this community, however this development departs from a life that previously lived in this community and was as such shaped by the norms of it.

Esposito moreover warns, with regard to the auto-immunity tendency in modernity, against the dangers of excessive medicalization in modern society.[134] Esposito's argument is that by increasingly medicalizing the body as to avoid risks, the body may lose the ability to take risks. The body becomes like a spoiled child; so used to the care of its caretakers, that it is unable to live autonomously. Esposito

---

[131] Esposito, *Bios*, 54.

[132] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 141-144.

[133] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 144.

[134] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 137-141.

mentions immunotherapy as an example: 'One of the main culprits is immunotherapy, which in acting to defend the body ends up weakening it, thereby lowering its sensitivity threshold to aggressors.'[135] Immunotherapy amplifies or reduces the immunity response of the body. An amplification of the immune response may risk harming bacteria that naturally protect the body, while a reduction of it may expose the body to new diseases. In both cases the manipulation of the immune system may at first instance help the body, but may make it possibly weaker – less capable of resisting natural threats – in the long run. An excessive usage of immunotherapy may consequently eventually pose risks to health of the community.

4.4 A critical assessment

To what extent can Esposito's thought about biopolitics be useful for a framework for the history of healthcare? Esposito sharpens the signification of both 'life' and 'power' by contrasting them in a broader framework. Because humans as a species necessarily need a community for its survival, political power exists.

In this way Esposito ties life and power together with the same dynamic that, I would argue, also characterizes each of the elements separately. He analyses both elements as a system that reproduces its own relations by distributing order and on the other hand leaves sufficient space open for changes in these relations so that it can adapt to a new environment. 'Life' can be seen as a system that reproduces and imposes its norms on an environment. However, a property of life is also that it is capable of transcending its norms, to be adaptable to different circumstances. Foucault's notion of power, which Esposito seems to take over, has the same structure. Foucault analyses power also as a system of relations – a certain strategic situation in a society – that reproduces itself. In Foucault's work, power always reproduces a certain order. It regulates the distribution of certain practices and norms. The possibility for adaptation is also at the core of Foucault's conception of power. Precisely the possibility of resistance is what distinguishes

---

[135] Esposito, *Immunitas*, 141.

relations of power according to him from for instance determinate forces of nature.[136] Power relations evolve according to Foucault in the sense that they stabilize competing interests in a society and on the other hand always leave room for adaptation. Precisely these shifts in power-knowledge relations is what in Foucault's work causes transitions in history.

Interestingly, Esposito shows how this system – a system that on the one hand reproduces a certain order and on the other hand leaves room for change – is constitutive of both the way power and life function on their own, and how these two elements influence each other. Power and life take on a stable orderly relation in a community. For instance, when a law is instituted, the life in the community institutes stability with regard to the relations of power. Conflicting interests are stabilized by a rule that regulates the conduct of these individuals. A law simultaneously also creates order in life, in the sense that regularity is imposed on the different lives. The dynamic of immunity destabilizes this relationship and makes room for change. For instance, a person is – as the sovereign – put outside the stable connection that is made between life and power in the juridical system of the community. He decides what the exceptions to the law are and he is therefore exempted – immunized – from rules of the community. By deciding independently of the existing laws the sovereign changes the way life in the community is lived and the way power relations are expressed.

Theoretically speaking Esposito's thought is very interesting, but with regard to practical purposes its usefulness may be limited. In practice most people desire to use history as a way – so to speak – to immunize themselves from a chaotic world. Esposito – in my eyes – exposes that there seems to be no spark of creativity in history, only immune reactions. His work points to a different approach to history. Such an approach would look at how a certain community has immunized itself from certain aspects of reality, looking to what extent this immunization is

---

[136] 'Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized.' Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 790.

still necessary or ethical and – if not – showing the usefulness of the expelled difference. Esposito for instance problematizes our notion of the body by contrasting it to Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the flesh.[137] Our contemporary conceptualisation and categorization of the body is largely the result of past discoveries in the field of medicine. However, those discoveries – and therefore also the conceptualizations and categorizations that are based on these discoveries – are partly the result of countering risks that at that time, or only at that time, appeared to endanger the lives of people. In what sense is the predominant conception of the body still the result of such responses to historically encountered dangers? Which parts of our life have therefore remained unthought or conceptually neglected? These questions remain intriguing.

---

[137] Esposito, *Bios*, 159-169.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis I analysed to what extent the thought of the philosophers Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito on biopolitics can be useful for examining the history of healthcare. Because each of these philosophers characterizes the biopolitical relation in a different way, each of them offers a different perspective on the biopolitical nature of the history of healthcare.

5.1 Three perspectives on the biopolitical nature of healthcare

As I showed in chapter two, Foucault's work makes clear that knowledge-formation plays an important part with respect to the biopolitical nature of the history of healthcare. Foucault makes visible how the increase in knowledge about life historically correlated with the emergence of power over life. First of all, the discovery of knowledge about the biological functions by biology and the medical science made it possible to control individual bodies with regard to particular ends. Individual bodies could consequently be distributed, examined, normalized, supervised and controlled on the basis of the norm of health. Due to the discovery of knowledge about the human species as a whole, people could subsequently be controlled on the basis of general biological properties. Through measuring, comparing and influencing the general biological properties of a population and the variables that influence these properties, modern governments sought to establish an optimal equilibrium for it. Healthcare was in modern states consequently organized to improve, for instance, the average life expectancy and mortality rate in a population. The practice of healthcare consequently also became intertwined with other political goals, such as achieving a productive and strong population. As a result, the norm of health was connected to other domains, such as sexuality, psychology and criminality. An almost endless amount of policies could theoretically be implemented on the basis of the statistical knowledge about the population. Modern governments consequently concentrated on governing as effective as possible. States distanced themselves from the private sphere to the extent that citizens could regulate themselves according to externally defined norms. While governments promoted the importance of health, they withdrew from directly intervening in the lives of people to the extent that citizen could care of

themselves. Consequently, the responsibility for maintaining a healthy lifestyle became for instance a self-evident part of the contemporary life of citizens.

In chapter three I looked if Agamben's analysis of biopolitics can be useful for examining the history of healthcare. Agamben's work makes the role of the law with regard to the biopolitical nature of the history of healthcare visible. He analyses politics as a dialectic between sovereignty, the law and life. He defines the sovereign as the one that decides on the exception of the law and he argues that the subject of this decision on the exception is always human life. Western political thought is according to Agamben moreover characterized by a specific relation to life. In instituting a certain way of living (*bios*) to achieve the good life, Western politics has always excluded simple natural life (*zoē*). In Western society politics does traditionally not relate to the particular life of someone, but to his or her biological functions. Agamben calls the *zoē* that is excluded by the sovereign decision 'bare life'. As an exception this bare life is abandoned by the law and to this extent exposed to death. The right to health is one of the rights that modern nation states constitutionally guarantee their citizens. Citizens were consequently cared for in modern states with respect to their whole simple natural life (*zoē*) on the basis of the particular way of living (*bios*) of healthcare. The emerging medical sciences moreover examined the simple natural life of citizens on the basis of the norm of health. Because of modern medicine the lives of citizens are thus more thoroughly included in the political sphere. Due to the growth of the executive branch of government, they are according to Agamben moreover increasingly at risk of being abandoned by the law. If a government decides to no longer reimburse certain medication because it argues that it does not sufficiently contribute to the 'health' of the population, those who depend on the medication to survive are to this extent abandoned by the law.

In chapter four I analysed to what extent Esposito's thought can useful for examining the history of healthcare. Esposito's work makes visible that the biopolitical nature of the history of healthcare can only be fully understood in relation to the way communities function. Esposito argues that the life of a community as a whole and the life of its members mutually affect each other. On

the one hand the members in a community share certain things, on the other hand some members are immunized from the reciprocal gift-giving of the community. Power determines according to Esposito the way this community-immunity dynamic is acted out. Healthcare functions as a system according to which individuals are set apart and cared for with regard to certain properties that are thought to threaten the life of the community as a whole. Starting from modernity political power is directly exercised on the biological aspects of the population. Esposito argues that this explains the growing importance of medical knowledge, healthcare norms and the emergence of extensive state regulation with the goal of improving the health of the community. The gathering of knowledge about life and the health-risks that chronically threaten it stimulated thinking about the right ways to immunize life. Contemporary healthcare is according to Esposito therefore characterized by an excessive medicalization because of the attempts to counteract any form of risk. Individual life is increasingly immunized to prevent any form of contamination. Being placed completely outside the protection of the healthcare systems consequently becomes more dangerous for someone.

5.2 The usefulness of biopolitics for the history of healthcare

To what extent can the thought of Foucault, Agamben and Esposito on biopolitics be useful for examining the history of healthcare? In their work the biopolitical relation is regarded as something that explains the existence of other historical phenomena. Foucault characterizes modern medicine as a phenomenon that emerged when the life of the species became part of its own political strategies. Agamben shows how the operation of the law and the institution of rights in Western society can be understood as an expression of a certain relationship between sovereign power and the life of subjects. Esposito moreover systematically deconstructs modern political notions such as liberty and sovereignty as symptoms of a broader community-immunity dynamic. Their work consequently offers a very fundamental understanding with regard to the history of healthcare and can be used for critiquing structural defaults in the way modern healthcare is organized.

However, the conceptualisations of Foucault, Agamben and Esposito are difficult to reconcile with other historical works because they deviate from usual

presuppositions about the nature of historical reality. The focus on the relation between power and life may also result in a too reductive approach to history. By making use of Foucault's notion of power a historian may tend to neglect other categories for understanding changes in the history, such as chance or the specific behaviour of a historical actor. Interpreting different historical texts with Agamben's distinctions of *bios* and *zoē* in mind might result in the creation of a unity between these texts that is not necessarily there. Esposito's analysis of the community-immunity dynamic is moreover so all-encompassing that it tends to become meaningless if one wants to apply it to a specific historical event. History is often used as an instrument with which a community tries to make sense of itself and this requires an emphasis on the concrete particularities of past events.

5.3 Historico-philosophical conclusions

A historian makes use of concepts to find the coherence with regard to different events and developments in the past. This thesis suggests that the notions of power, life and their interrelation are useful for tracking down such coherences. Because humans have always been living creatures that exercise power over each other, these notions are useful for understanding changes and transformations in history.

 The work of Foucault, Agamben and Esposito moreover makes clear that the discovery of the mechanisms of life by biology and the medical sciences can be seen as an important event in history. This made life an object that could be situated, compared, tested and calculated in relation to other measurable regularities. Many fundamental political developments in Western history – such as the origin of the modern self-understanding in the human sciences that is linked to biology, the horrendous systematic devaluation of the lives of minorities in modern totalitarian states and the growing emergence of security measures in different societal domains – can only be fully understood in the light of this fundamental event. Their work consequently gives the history of healthcare a more central position for understanding modernity.

 At the present the conceptualisations of Foucault, Agamben and Esposito seem to be too abstract and far-fetched to have much direct functionality for historians. However, when new technologies will make it increasingly easier to

directly manipulate life and if the possibilities for its manipulation will be embedded in political practices, their work might become more useful. The history of healthcare could then provide a fruitful source for reflection. The works of Foucault, Agamben and Esposito might provide the useful tools to find coherence and meaning in it.

Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception.* Translated by Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Use of Bodies*. Translated by Adam Kotsko. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.

Briggs, Helen. "First monkey clones created in Chinese laboratory." *BBC News*, January 24, 2018. Accessed October 27, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/health-42809445.

Campbell, Timothy, and Adam Sitze, eds. *Biopolitics: A Reader.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2013.

Esposito, Roberto. *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Esposito, Roberto. *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

Esposito, Roberto. *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

Esposito, Roberto. "Interview with Roberto Esposito." By Timothy Campbell and Anna Paparcone. *Diacritics* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 49-56.

Foucault, Michel. *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*. Translated by Graham Burchell. London: Verso, 2003.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Foucault, Michel. "The Birth of Social Medicine." In *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, edited by James D. Faubion, 135-156. New York: The New Press, 2015.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan. London: Routledge, 2003.

Foucault, Michel. "The Crisis of Medicine or the Crisis of Antimedicine?." Translated by Edgar C. Knowlton Jr. et al. *Foucault Studies,* no. 1 (December 2004): 5-19.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1*, An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Foucault, Michel. "The Incorporation of the Hospital into Modern Technology." In *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, translated by Edgar Knowlton Jr. et al., 141-151. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007.

Foucault, Michel. "The Politics of Health in the Eighteenth Century." Translated by Richard A. Lynch. *Foucault Studies*, no. 18 (October 2014): 113-127.

Foucault, Michel. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Translated by Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Foucault, Michel. *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003.

Foucault, Michel. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 777-795.

Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Kelly, Mark G. E. *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Lemke, Thomas. *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.

Porter, Dorothy. *Health, Civilization and The State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Roberts, Michelle. "Scientists build synthetic embryos." *BBC News*, May 3, 2018. Accessed October 27, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/news/health-43960363.

Sample, Ian. "Harvard scientists reverse the ageing process in mice – now for humans." *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010. Accessed October 27, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/science/2010/nov/28/scientists-reverse-ageing-mice-humans.

Wagner, Peter. *Modernity: Understanding the Present*. Cambridge: Polity, 2012.