

# Episode 15: What is biopolitics?

## Transcription

00:00:07 Aada Pettersson (AP): Hi everyone and welcome to another episode of the EuroStorie podcast, the stories of politics, law and the history of Europe. My name is Aada Pettersson and with me is my co-host Floris van Doorn.

00:00:18 Floris van Doorn (FvD): Hello.

00:00:19 AP: On this podcast we're here to talk with researchers about all things Europe and today we've got the pleasure of talking to Marco Piasentier. Hi Marco.

00:00:28 Marco Piasentier (MP): Hello, hi. It's great to be here and thank you for the invitation.

00:00:31 AP: Thank you for coming on board.

00:00:34 MP: Thanks.

00:00:35 FvD: So, Marco is a university researcher and another newly minted team leader here at EuroStorie as part of sub project two, Discovering the Limits of Reason, Europe and the Crisis of Universalism. He has recently completed his monograph *On Biopolitics: An Inquiry into Nature and Language*, which was published by Routledge in 2020. Previously he was a researcher for the university of Kent and at university of Jyväskylä, and these days Marco's work primarily focuses on themes related to post-Kantian European philosophy, social and political thought and the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. And today we'll be talking with Marco about biopolitics and the meaning of modern life, which sounds remarkably akin to me, so I'm sure there is plenty of

00:01:30 MP: To me as well, so let's see how it plays out.

00:01:33 FvD: I'm sure there's plenty to unpack there.

00:01:35 AP: So, before going into biopolitics, Marco, who are you and what on earth are you doing in Finland?

00:01:45 MP: Wow, I pay my analyst a lot of money to find an answer to this question. And I haven't had one yet. But I can give you maybe some hint about my academic background and how I started studying philosophy and, well I had a degree from the University of Trieste in philosophy and psychology, and Trieste is a rather small town in northern east of Italy, but the department of philosophy had a quite interdisciplinary vibe, so we used to study both obscure continental philosophy about obscure theories about modern society as well as the philosophy of science, and so also in my academic career I try to somehow keep this source of philosophy alive in my research. On the one hand the critical approach to society and on the other the approach more focused on the scientific world view. And in this regard a very significant experience for me was an internship at the psychiatric clinic in San Giovanni.

00:03:00 AP: Okay!

00:03:01 MP: At the same city in Trieste. And this clinic is rather important both in Italy and in Europe because in the 70s it was a testing ground for the closure of asylums in Italy. And there is this famous psychiatrist called Franco Basaglia and he started working there in the 70s and he proposed the dismantling of the psychiatric hospitals by a really new way of thinking about mental health and showing that the idea of madness is at least to a certain extent a social construction and then when you build a physical wall, like the wall of an asylum, then you are also building a metaphorical and conceptual wall that separates the

inside from the outside, the mad person from the sane one. And during those years I was also reading Michel Foucault that is this obscure French philosopher.

00:04:04 FvD: Remarkably obscure.

00:04:05 MP: Remarkably obscure, in fact his early works are about the concept of madness.

00:04:10 FvD: Yes.

00:04:11 MP: And this is why I also wanted to have this internship in this psychiatric clinic because I really could appreciate how philosophy can help us to reshape, not only conceptual walls, but also physical ones, and how these two types of structures are interrelated to each other. And I think that also the relationship between nature and culture that inform a complex understanding of the human being was relevant for the developing of interesting biopolitics, because biopolitics is, as the etymology of the term suggests, is about the relationship of politics and bios that is the Greek term for life. So, the relationship between nature and society, between history and biology, so when you address the question for instance of mental health, you really need to keep this broad view in mind to avoid reductionism, to avoid to reduce mental health for instance to social construction or just a biological idea.

00:05:23 MP: And yes, after the degree in Trieste there weren't fundings for a PhD, as it often happens in Italy, so it is not a surprise, so I found a PhD from the University of Kent, at the school of European Culture and Languages. There I developed more these topics, focusing especially on Italian philosophy since there are many contemporary Italian philosophers that work on this theory about the relationship of nature and culture and so on. But, I guess theories apart, a very good experience related to this academic path was the possibility of leaving in different countries, and every time I moved to a new country, obviously I had some visiting positions, but then every time I moved to a country for instance for the PhD, or then for post-doc, I moved, the idea the country would have been home, and this creates a sense of disorientation to certain extent because obviously you no longer belong to your country of origin but you don't even belong to the new country, so you are sort of in between and this could be quite disorienting and it's also a bit scary to a certain extent because you lose some ground. But, at the same time it also gives a strong sense of freedom, a freedom of experimenting with new identities, with new possibilities, a freedom of challenging habits that you thought were written in stone. And so, I guess the academic career went hand in hand with this existential process, if you will, that is still going on.

00:07:23 FvD: And then, the concept of biopolitics is very much, or it very much originates from continental philosophy and I was just wondering, how is the experience of biopolitics in that sense as an academic researcher in a place like Britain, and now in Finland. Has it been different? How has it sort of shaped your understanding of the governance of biology and the like in a sense?

00:07:47 MP: That's a very interesting question and also difficult. I don't know if I have an answer. Obviously biopolitics has to do with life, and so for sure life in these countries is different from the way in which you relate with people, the way in which you go to the doctor, and for sure there are structures and procedures that really define your identity that are different in these countries. At the same time you also discover that after all it's not so different, and maybe you also discover that there is a European identity somewhere there in between these countries, and as Nietzsche would say, you've probably studied, discovering what it means to be a good European, because for Nietzsche being a good European had to do with being a free spirit, so obviously freedom is such an ideological term nowadays and should be probably deconstructed, but at the same time there is probably some truth in the idea that European thought despite all the problems, despite all the violence that it brought and still brings also was able to invent a notion of freedom that has to do with critical work on our limits, on our existential limits and so, this I think was quite interesting to discover.

00:09:19 FvD: Shall we start and unpack this term.

00:09:22 AP: Biopolitics.

00:09:23: FvD: A bit more. Would you be able to further illuminate us, in the spirit of the scientific revolution as well, how these concepts, especially the meaning of modernity has sort of emerged through history and how it informs contemporary life in quite, or the way we think about contemporary life, in quite profound ways?

00:09:51 MP: Yes, that's absolutely true that in order to understand biopolitics you have to somehow try to understand what it means to be modern. Biopolitics has to do with biological life, there could be an argument according to which politics has always been biopolitical, but for sure I think that it is quite significant to place the birth of biopolitics, the birth of the government, in relation with the major shifts that characterize modernity, finding an ultimate definition of modernity is impossible, so here we will provide just some random examples, but for instance.

00:10:38 FvD: Please.

00:10:39 MP: I'll try, if we consider for instance the scientific revolutions that occurred in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century especially revolutions in astronomy. So, these were remarkable scientific achievements that they showed us that nature is not spiritual entity that we can have mechanistic understanding of nature and through these scientific revolutions we also developed an experimental and scientific method that allowed scientist to provide empirical answers to questions that before modernity were considered to be purely speculative belonging to theology and metaphysics. But, these revolutions also had crucial impact about the way in which human beings understand themselves. So, who are we? Well previously you Aada asked me this question, this impossible question. But, for sure challenging an anthropocentric view according to which the human being is the center of the universe really redefines the answer to the question what kind of creature do we think we are. And also, what are the political consequences of this new conception of the human being. But the transition, moving on, according to what Floris also was saying about the revolutions of modern science. It's not about just the cosmological view of the human being that changes thanks to the revolutions in astronomy but also a transformation about the way in which we understand ourselves as living creatures. And here we could refer to a famous well-known painting by Rembrandt, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painter. And the painting is called the anatomy lesson of Dr. Tulp.

00:12:52 FvD: Yes, and I've got it here printed

00:12:55 MP: Fantastic

00:12:55 FvD: Unfortunately the listeners can't see it of course but just as to just to describe it for the listeners. What we see is an autopsy what I think of sort of performed by this famous surgeon, I presume.

00:13:10 MP: He was

00:13:10 FvD: Who has probably commissioned this painting as well and around him are doctors and they're all sort of observing the muscles of the arm and how all the tendons are and how they perform and sort.

00:13:26 MP: Exactly.

00:13:27 FvD: And the victim would have been an executed prisoner, I think that's good to know as well. In terms of controlling the living and also the dead.

00:13:39 MP: Absolutely.

00:13:30 FvD: What's again the significance of this painting?

00:13:45 MP: Yes, the question is what do we observe in that painting? And what we see is that this painting is a sort of a representation of the capacity of modern science to grasp and manipulate the mechanism that regulate the human body. So, this painting really expresses the modern confidence in the human capacity to conquer and manipulate nature.

00:14:10 FvD: Yes.

00:14:11 MP: And this is something rather new in the history of Europe. And it is in light of this scientific revolution that we have to place the birth of biopolitics so this new materialistic conception of the body, the idea that we can manipulate the bodies and populations, and these revolutions do not only occur in astronomy, in medicine, but also in politics. And, Thomas Hobbes that is conventionally considered to be the philosopher that structured modern political science wanted to be considered as an important scientist so his aim was that of creating a discipline that had the same structure of the natural sciences, was rooted on scientific conception of the human being. And this discipline that is political sciences, had to place the conservation of life, preservation of life, *conservationem vitae* in Latin, at the very centre of its theoretical framework. So, politics starts to be the politics of life, starts to be biopolitics to a certain extent.

00:15:31 FvD: Conserving and controlling and managing life more generally?

00:15:34 MP: Precisely, precisely. And this obviously is very important as many important positive elements but also comes with great risks, and the history of modern Europe is disseminated with these examples, also tragic examples. Well, obviously Nazism for instance, now we are making a very significant jump, so it's also important to take the necessary distinctions but for sure Nazism has to do with the concept of biological purity, and in the name of that idea of purity with the idea of conserving that type of life you eliminate other lives that are supposedly contaminating that purity. And so you can see how that transformation of the concept of human being comes together with dangerous outcomes. But I think it is also important to trace the distinction between science and politics. So, one mistake that many biopolitical thinkers in my view tend to commit is to reduce science to a political invention. Obviously there is science and there is politics and the two are connected, but I guess it is important to somehow keep the two distinguished, and not think that science is the source of evil in itself, so this is very important in my view.

00:17:19 FvD: But there does seem to be a tension between, in or at least in the way we tend to perceive of nature, between on the one hand saying life should be about controlling nature, but then how do we seek purpose? Does it come from nature or does it still come from otherworldly entities?

00:17:37 MP: That's the question. That's really the question. And, I think European philosophy since Kant, but even before I guess, the entire history of modern European philosophy and for sure many other philosophies but since I'm focusing on this in my research, can be considered as an attempt to find a space for freedom and meaning within a conception of human being that is grounded in nature. And there is obviously to create a realm that exceeds nature and so to reconstitute a premodern conception but at the same the risk is also that of reducing meaning to nature or thinking that from moving to another perspective that science can have existential questions for us, while in the reality science gives us tools to understand the world, describes the world in a way that previously was unimaginable for us. But I guess it is in light of this description that we have to try to build the meaning rather than try to find the meaning because this is just a description. And so I guess the question, the question of meaning, in modern worldview is really extremely important because modernity is historically associated with a process of disenchantment and then is it possible to re-enchant the world within this framework and if you find an answer to that, please call me as soon as possible.

00:19:32 FvD: I surely will.

00:19:35 AP: So, as a classicist myself

00:19:37 MP: Yes.

00:19:39 AP: I see that there's a place for history in everything and although I like science, where does history come in to all of this? Or does it? Is there a place for it?

00:19:50 MP: Yes, that's another very difficult question. And obviously history is crucial to put things in perspective, and if we stick to the critical approaches to biopolitics, namely those approaches that try to analyze the development of the politics of life in modernity, we notice that history has been a crucial tool to understand how this form of politics unfolds. And more than that it was also a way to resist this politics, because through history you can obviously place a given worldview in perspective and notice that this is just one of the many ways in which we human beings have come up with an idea of understanding of ourselves and the world that surrounds us. So I think that no matter how science can be and will be even more precise and accurate in providing a description of the world, we have always to situate that perspective in relationship with a historical understanding of science and its condition of possibility, its social conditions of possibility. And so really history, history and science, have to be always in my view connected to have an in-depth understanding of where we are and what we are doing.

00:21:45 FvD: And this takes us right back to the concept of biopolitics because in a sense I think that was very much what Foucault himself was trying to do.

00:21:55 MP: For sure.

00:21:55 FvD: Try to place history and science in a conversation with one another. And you are trying to do this in your book, in a sense. But just to further unpick what it would mean to have more sort of historical understanding of the world as such and life as well. What would it mean to be a researcher working in that tradition, especially when trying to critique certain understandings of race or gender for example?

00:22:25 MP: Yes, that's a very important question that brings us to a methodological point, and the methodology that you would adopt in this case is genealogy, and genealogy is a way of doing history that shows us that what we think to be an ultimate origin, or ultimate way of understanding the world, in reality is nothing but a perspective about looking at things. Basically, nothing is written in stone. And obviously this leads to a paradox though. Because if nothing is written in stone, the sentence I have just said is written in stone yes or no, and then this is the ultimate paradox of doing research through genealogy, that then you end up in a difficult position probably, but then at the same time it is a necessary perspective to challenge those views that we take for granted, and that serves as a ground for creating clear cut distinction between different groups in a society, or between different societies. And so there is a strong emancipatory message in this methodology and this is why we tend to call it critical, so there is this critical emancipatory idea that comes with it.

00:24:11 AP: We've dropped Nietzsche, we've dropped Foucault, how to make these more concrete?

00:24:17 MP: An impossible question for a philosopher.

00:24:19 AP: So could you give us an example of biopolitics in contemporary society?

00:24:29 MP: Yes for sure. Well there are many, the Covid-pandemic is a clear example of biopolitics, and climate change is another example of biopolitics and in both cases there have been many discussions concerning the relationship between science and society, between medicine and politics, for instance when we consider the Covid-pandemic, the question is to which extent doctors should take decisions about society, and the question of vaccination is for instance still quite hot topic and also it is interesting to understand the reasons why people decide not to get the vaccine. And, nowadays there is this well known expression that has to do with post-truth. And the idea is that people are simply ignorant so they don't want to take the vaccine because in reality they don't understand science. And this is certainly a way to

understand this question but there are also other ways of framing vaccine-hesitancy for instance, and so another way to frame it is to think that in reality is not a matter of truth, but it is a matter of trust. And the fact that people no longer trust the institutions that should care about them and this is a very biopolitical topic, and so when we come to Europe or the West, we should also start wondering, why there is this lack of trust in institutions and one way to address this question is to address the dismantling of for instance the welfare state in European countries and the fact that people have this feeling that economic interest prevail to the well being of the population, and so if biopolitics has to do with well being of population, in reality it turns out that there are other questions, other interests that seems to prevail. And so one way to probably reframe this debate about vaccination is to address it from the idea of state, why people are scared of the state, why they think that the state is regulated by dynamics that exceed the structure of the state itself, such as profit, capitalism and so on. And this is just one of the examples. The other one obviously has to do with climate change and how we should use science in order to better understand how to move forward with the response to climate change. But I don't know whether your question, which direction your question wanted to take.

00:28:09 FvD: For example the climate change, one could wonder since we all know that the world is in a climate emergency and this is a very scientific understanding of what's happening in a sense. But where would this lead critique, cause for example it's clearly happening and yet many critical theorists, themselves very much believe in it being the case but then if they suddenly became wetted to this idea of science they've constantly been trying to critique, where does this lead critique? From their perspective, and is there a danger that by sort of wetting themselves too much to this understanding of science, in this context, they lose a sense or perspective on the importance of critique?

00:29:00 MP: For sure. Yeah this is very interesting, and for sure the question of climate change has led to a transformation of the relationship between science and critique, as you correctly said, critique has historically been somehow opposed to science. We've seen science with scepticism, but nowadays I guess we have to partially revise this relationship, and think that science is a tool that can be adopted in order to provide a critical understanding, a critical picture of the world. This does not mean that we have to forget an historical understanding of science, like Aada mentioned before, so this is very important because no matter how true a theory can be, we have always to contextualize it, place it in context, understand it in its social condition of existence. But at the same time for sure I guess critique nowadays has to drop a radical critique of science and embrace science in a more affirmative manner, this is really essential.

00:30:25 FvD: And once again trying to place like politics and nature or maybe politics and history in conversation with one another and rather than try to eliminate one or the other from that conversation.

00:30:35 MP: Yes exactly and this is really a generational transformation in the field of critical theory.

00:30:45 AP: Okay, it's time for our bonus question.

00:30:47 FvD: Yes!

00:30:48 MP: Noo.

00:30:50 AP: So we ask guests to tell us something that they do outside academia. And I always tell an example of myself, so I love watching biathlon.

00:31:00 MP: Okay.

00:31:01 AP: So Marco, what do you like to do outside of the world of Foucault and Nietzsche and biopolitics.

00:31:08 MP: Wow, I guess proper academic answer would be to say translating Homer.

00:31:17 FvD: Oh my goodness.

00:31:18 MP: But in reality no, I guess I don't know, it's good to take a break and leave the world of academia, and I don't know, find the time to spend time with friends that you haven't seen for a long time, or learning a new recipe, now I'm learning new recipes using zucchini, how they are called in Italy, how do you say zucchini in English?

00:31:48 FvD: It could be called a zucchini or a courgette, courgette.

00:31:51 MP: Courgette. So I'm very into this new cooking thing at the moment, and then so yes I guess, just going for a walk or visiting that place that is just in front of your place but you never go because you think it's too close and there is always time to go. Doing these things is very good also for doing good research I guess.

00:32:15 AP: The Finnish way of saying zucchini, the translation of kesäkurpitsa is summer pumpkin.

00:32:21 MP: Summer pumpkin.

00:32:23 FvD: It feels a bit like a pumpkin actually.

00:32:25 AP: Yeah yeah it does, it is a kind of a pumpkin.

00:32:30 MP: Interesting.

00:32:31 AP: Thank you Marco for coming onto the podcast and talking about biopolitics and zucchinis.

00:32:37 FvD: Biopolitics, the meaning of life and courgettes.

00:32:41 MP: Well it's been fantastic.

00:32:43 FvD: Absolute, absolute pleasure.