

Three Policy Problems: Biocreep and the extension of biopolitical administration

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Abstract

This paper critiques recent developments in educational discourse through an analysis of two UK Government White Papers (DFE, 2021; DFE, 2022a) and three specific problems. I argue that the latter herald forms of “biocreep”. Echoing the analysis of such phenomena in the work of Michel Foucault, this gradual extension of “biopolitics” into the field of education is a tendency which has accelerated with the Coronavirus pandemic and raises many questions for policy analysis. First, I show how the White Papers’ approach to life and its related assumptions embody an attempt to further entrench the techniques of biopolitical population management

in secondary and further education settings. Second, my analysis of the two Papers shows not just a deepening discursive shift towards ways of instrumentalising educational processes, but also identifies a triple problem of political assemblage: *primo*, this shift relies on the assemblage of a “problematic subject”; *secondo*, it simultaneously assembles the problem of *value extraction*; and *tertio*, it obscures the problem of desire or unruliness of the assemblages created. Just as discursive practices of *instrumentation*, *administration* and *evacuation* try to manage these assemblages, they remain unable to contain the three problems they enshrine.

Introduction

In a recent paper, Thompson et al (2022, p.701) argue that analysis of the educational policy of the OECD identifies two problems: on one hand, the organization itself relies on “the *desire to produce* the human capital that its education assessments such as PISA measures” while simultaneously “constructing *policy problems* that are (incorrectly) perceived to be manageable” (my emphasis). The authors’ use of policy analysis techniques based in assemblage theory to critique international organizations also sets out an agenda for policy analysis that can also be pursued on a national level. This paper discusses how a recent national policy agenda can be shown to construct three policy problems in line with this critique. Specifically, I show how the *desire to produce subjects* is embodied in recent policy discourse just as equally specific *policy problems* are set out and explicitly constructed as manageable objects.

To do this, I critically analyse two recent White Papers (DFE, 2021; DFE, 2022a), whose declarations involve a problematic discursive shift to the biopolitical administration of the education sector and the growing field of “educational biopolitics” (e.g. Pierce, 2013; Wittman, 2016; Bourassa, 2020). The latter, an application of ideas drawn from Michel Foucault’s writings, is of course not new. But an acceleration of this phenomenon can be linked to the Coronavirus epidemic, which continues to raise urgent questions about access to education, the quality of health care, and deep societal inequality. Such issues are not of course limited to the UK, and the role of education policy as states re-examine their post-pandemic roles is of increasing importance and debate (see for instance Van den Berge, 2020; Lorenzini, 2021; Pele and Riley, 2021; Hojme, 2022).

After a brief introduction to the concept of biopower and its gradual extension (“biocreep”) I discuss both White Papers specifically from the point of view of their shared focus on, and

highly problematic assertions about, life and its related processes. This analysis suggests that such policy exemplifies a deepening of the techniques of biopolitical population management into distinct education settings.

However, my analysis also identifies a triple problem within the assemblage of the political apparatus required by such management. Looking closely at the policy texts as attempts to construct new objects of managerial control, I first argue that this shift relies on the assemblage of a “problem-subject”. By this, I mean that such policy text attempts to construct an educational subject as an assemblage of potentials whose management is imperative: the subject is a problem to be governed rather than solved. Second, I show how the construction of this “problem-subject” implies the related problem of *value extraction*. Here, my point is that the “problem-subject” is not created in and for itself but deliberately as a solution to a greater problem, in this case, that of the extraction of value. Thirdly, my analysis shows how these two constructions obscure a third problem at the heart of this policymaking assemblage: as Thompson et al (op.cit) suggest, the creation of subjectivity and the means for extracting value both imply the conviction that the latter can and will operate according to plan. This belief, however, is unwarranted and, incidentally, a source of hope for those who fear the parasitic encroachment of biopower beyond the sphere of physical productivity and into that of affect, imagination and creativity itself. *In fine*, such policymaking obscures the problem of desire within the assemblages it creates: just as discursive practices of *instrumentation*, *administration* and *evacuation* (set out below) struggle to manage these assemblages, they remain unable to contain their tendency to disrupt. The attempt to govern such constructs do not express the desire to improve education systems and provision, as they would claim. Instead, they express fundamentally exploitative nature of capitalistic expansionism quite obviously at odds with the need to tackle threats to economic sustainability, planetary ecology, and civil liberty.

These admittedly bold claims can be grounded in local developments by focusing on policy discourse in the UK. Comparing a recent White Paper (DFE, 2022a) destined for the secondary sector (11-18 age range) with a predecessor aimed at the Further Education sector¹ (DFE, 2021) demonstrates a significant move towards a profound way of positioning, and governing,

¹ For the official regulator, Ofsted, the FE sector as includes a range of colleges and training providers delivering post-16 and adult training programmes. The emphasis is increasingly on employment-related skills (Ofsted, 2022)

education as a whole through a discourse of biopolitics. The latter is examined in detail below, and its importance, I show, lies in the way education, educational systems and those they exist to serve are turning towards a form of exploitation of life itself. Notwithstanding its abstract metaphysical overtones (critically examined below), this shift has concrete implications for wider education policy critique. These implications can be summarised with a paradox: despite its explicit concern for life, when applied to the education sphere, biopolitics effectively reduces the latter to a biological entity. Shorn of its social, moral and affective value, education and its participants are subjected to processes that I refer to as *instrumentation*, *administration*, and *evacuation*. Together, the White Papers show us how the education policymaking process is subject to “biocreep” – and why its newly created “problem-subjects” may prove less amenable to organized value extraction than biopolitics might expect.

Biopolitics and biocreep in policy analysis

To understand the role of biopolitics in this connection it is useful to understand what biopolitics is and how biopolitical policy discourse works. The term was coined in the 1970s by Michel Foucault (1926-1984), at the time recognised for his wide-ranging investigations into the historical development of ideas such as madness, clinical practice, and scientific knowledge in general (1961;1963;1966). Like many contemporaries post-1968, Foucault’s work turned increasingly towards the politics of knowledge and, particularly, government. In the belief that “what is held to be true will be obeyed” (Veyne, 2008, p. 141), for Foucault forms of government through *biopower* developed in the post-enlightenment period (1970; 1976a; 1976b) in order to make life simultaneously the instrument *and* the effect of power (Foucault, 1976a, p. 216). By this he means that, after centuries of maintaining itself through the *negative* ability to inflict punishment and death, power increasingly uses *positive* advances in health, education and economics to manage its subjects. Having noticed the wasteful inefficacy of past attempts to control the population through, for instance, the public execution or arbitrary incarceration of individuals, biopower tries to manage populations *en masse* by doing the opposite: extracting value from living processes which would otherwise go to waste. Power thus extends well beyond the military, even the psyche, and into the most intimate areas of our lives (Foucault, 1984a; 1984b; 2018).

It is not difficult to see an echo of such claims extends into everyday educational practices ranging from confessional and therapeutic pedagogies to the technological extension of

educational spaces into the home. During and Post-Covid, the problems arising from the accelerated adoption of educational techniques and technologies include not just pedagogical questions but also concerns for mental health, social inequality and the relentless expansion of surveillance techniques (see for instance Brabazon, 2020; Schwartzman, 2020; Williamson et al, 2020; Bailenson, 2021; Coleman, 2021; Feng et al, 2021; Keep *et al*, 2021; Naz, 2021; O’Dea and Stern, 2022; Saito, 2022; World Bank, 2022).

This expansion certainly appears to exemplify the idea that biopower exists to *invest life through and through*² via various techniques of control and value extraction. But, as analysis so the policy documents below shows, doing so implies a form of deep-seated (and doubtless unwitting) *vitalism*. Vitalism is a credo according to which some irreducible, unique force, property or principle drives living processes and things. Popular at the end of the 19th century, more recent exponents include James Lovelock (Lovelock, 2000) and Lynn Margulis (Sagan, 1967). Both deploy the “innate force” idea to show how self-organizing systems and endosymbiotic relationships work on at different levels to drive change. Although seductive, critics have long associated vitalism with obscurantism, pseudo-science and a lack of rigour and credibility (Bergson 2007/ 2013; see also Dema, 2007; Weber, 2010; Bennett, 2010; Osborne, 2016; Coulter et al. 2019).

Deployed politically, this outdated credo has, nonetheless, significant implications. Reflecting recent developments in educational technology and the growth of virtual pedagogical experiences following the Covid pandemic, it offers a recognisable logic of technological progress focused on extracting value from virtual entities rather than, for example, from the production of actual goods and resources *per se* (see Foucault, 1976a, p.190; 1976b, p.219; see also Rambeau, 2006, pp.104-107). Its focus has accompanied concrete improvements in many lives, for instance by reducing infant mortality, extending life expectations and public health generally – and not least in facilitating coordinated medico-societal responses to the Coronavirus pandemic.

However, seeking out, cultivating and farming vitalistic forces is also big business and, when linked to the real anxiety about past and future pandemics, lends a superficially humane face to an essentially exploitative ideology which encroaches further and further into everyday lives. Analytically speaking, I use “biocreep” to describe this extension: Discursively, it refers not

² “un pouvoir dont la plus haute fonction désormais n’est peut-être plus de tuer mais d’investir la vie *de part en part*” (Foucault, 1976a:183, my emphasis). Note that Foucault’s ambivalence is explicit here: although sometimes obscured by translation, Foucault hedging language stresses the instability of knowledge itself and, therefore the possibility of subversion (see Rambeau, 2006; Veyne, 2008).

just to the extension of measures designed to enhance the vitality of a given population, but also to the escalating use of language that enshrines these measures in a value system that makes them seem axiomatic. It affects clinical and health practices, of course, but the analysis below suggests that it also increasingly penetrates schools, workplaces, families and the (intimate) relationships between them. It can even be seen in attempts on a societal scale to enhance and recruit wellbeing, creativity and even sustainability to this end. These have filtered down to educational systems and processes which are specifically designed to promote and monetize them. The immaterial spaces of networked environments, virtual architectures and hyper-real multiverses are increasingly touted as indispensable to this brave new epistemic world (see for example Naz, 2021; COF, 2020; AOC, 2021a; Giles, 2021).

This brings us to the correlation between UK's educational response to the latter and the pandemic. Covid-19 has highlighted a range of deep-seated societal issues of demography (aging populations, immigration), the environment (poor air and water quality, housing) and of course public health (cancer treatment, social care) among many others.³ It has not just accelerated many existing trends, particularly in developing education as a tool for the management of public health in the biopolitical sense: it also draws our attention to the links between the pandemic and announcements such as those made by two White Papers in question.

The 2021 White Paper: “Skills for jobs: lifelong learning for opportunity and growth”

In a recent paper (Beighton, 2021) I set out exactly how these links can be identified. Three features of this discourse can be singled out as characteristic signs of biopolitical discourse. First, vitalistic tropes (*growth, unleashing potential, thriving, dynamism etc*) convey the belief that some ineffable life force exists and can be exploited; second, quasi-religious language (*creation, transformation, vision, mission etc*) conveys vitalism's mystical teleology; and third, dromophilic references to acceleration (*speed, track, channel, dynamism etc*) confirm the pressing need to accept this telos without question: the goal is indeed a “trust-led” education system (UK Government, 2022b).

³ The 2021 White Paper's release coincided with evidence of the UK government's poor response to the pandemic. The worst weekly death rate in the world and a tally of over 100,000 deaths were recorded by 31st January in the UK (OWID, 2021; UK Government, 2021). An increasingly effective vaccination campaign has since changed perceptions to a certain extent.

This vitalistic discourse is used to promote biopolitical goals throughout the 2021 document, where references to the way in which life will be administered regularly combine some or all of these three tropes.

Indeed, the 2021 White Paper starts with the declaration of a “fundamental” concern with “fulfilment and enrichment on a personal level” (DFE, 2021, p. 4). The concern for deep vitalistic processes is made clear because so much “latent creativity and talent” has been “squandered” (ibid.) the White Paper is therefore “the lever to unleash it”, helping people learn necessary skills, get great jobs, and thus providing the means to plan “a fulfilling and productive life” (ibid.). From the start, the importance of living process, creativity production, and the need to maximise both are repeatedly stressed.⁴ Such terms also abound in the speeches and documents that accompany the White Paper, referring to it as a “crusade” or a “mission” (Williamson, 2020). The numinous teleology of potential, value and mystical transformation waiting to be unleashed is striking:

A word you often hear in relation to education is ‘potential’. We’ve all got it, although some may have more of it than others. But potential is not just a human asset, it’s a social one, it’s an economic one and it’s certainly a business one. Potential is what can turn base metal into gold.

(Williamson, op. cit)

These two tropes are compounded by a third, namely that of acceleration. Because of the ineluctable “rate of technological change”, (further) education must quickly build “agile”, “adaptable” workforce through fast, flexible retraining, updating skills and moving into growth sectors as required (DFE, 2021, p. 4). This “blueprint for the future” is a “pathway to a bright future” (DFE, 2021, p.3) and employability.⁵ The resultant apparatus serves to accelerate the extraction of the virtual capital:

This combination of provision enables people to leave education well prepared to be successful and productive in their chosen occupation – and provides employers with a pipeline of job-ready employees.

(DFE, 2021, p.34)

⁴ Sheer numbers prove little, but such tropes pepper the White paper’s 73 pages: *life, living* etc (62 times); *force* (32 times); *potential* (12 times); *grow* (20 times); *increase* (25 times); *expand* (12 times); *vital* (7 times).

⁵ The semantic field of speed and transit is important here: “pathways” (8 mentions) and “routes” (27 mentions) to “boost” (6 mentions) etc.

Having identified this biopolitical trend in the 2021 Paper, the question remains as to whether it extends to the 2022 White Paper aimed at the secondary sector and, thus, the beginnings of biocreep. My analysis below shows that a striking similarity exists, suggesting at the very least a degree of consensus, if not actual coordination, about how these otherwise distinct parts of the UK education system are to be managed in the near future.

The 2022 White Paper: “Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child”

On 29th March 2022 the UK government’s Department for Education (DFE) published a White Paper⁶ entitled “Opportunity for all: strong schools with great teachers for your child” (DFE, 2022a). Aimed at reducing educational inequality as part of a wider “levelling up” agenda, the Paper also aims to improve quality through a “fully trust led system” (DFE, 2022a, *sic*; see also UK Government 2022b). This system of interconnected schools is expected to help students “reach the full height of their potential” (DFE, 2022b, *sic*) by reducing system fragmentation and increasing the economic benefits of education (DFE, 2022c).

As we have seen, the 2022 White Paper aims to “level up” education, notably by increasing the role of MATs in the provision of high-quality secondary education. Critics have been quick to respond to “Opportunity for all”, however, suggesting that its goals are underfunded, impractical and ideologically driven. A lack of evidence for the superiority of this system has been often highlighted (NFER, 2015; EPI, 2017; Greany and Higham, 2018; NEU, 2020), and a suspicious haste and a lack of funding have also been pinpointed (UCU, 2022). A disregard for the “mysterious millions” which have “disappeared into the coffers of favoured trusts” in this quest for “performance” and “uniformity” has also been criticized (NEU, 2022).

While these appraisals of the new White Paper are discomfoting, they are not new. Much policy has used the tropes of life, potential and (re)generation in the past (DFES, 2005; 2006; DIUS, 2008; DFE, 2017; Russell, 2021 etc). Indeed, there is little doubt that the UK system requires better funding and coordination and that errors of mismanagement and even corruption have indeed occurred not least in the key area of academicization, the most controversial focus

⁶ The UK Government defines White Papers as policy documents containing proposals for future legislation. As a basis for further consultation, they allow discussion and final changes to be made before a Bill is formally presented to Parliament.

of the 2022 White Paper.⁷ Critics have long discussed these ideas in relation to education: policies and practice driven by the mechanistic assumptions and human capital theory (see for example Becker, 1975; Lines, 2008; Feher, M. 2009; Fix, 2018) are held to replace content and criticality with narrow, job-oriented training and/or intrusive, confessional pedagogies. For critics, these are intended to guarantee the marketable (but otherwise largely meaningless) outcomes linked to the outsourcing and regulation of education systems for data-farming and the surveillance of health, disability and employability (e.g. Coffield, 1999; Lucas, 2004; Olssen, 2006; Fejes and Nicoll, 2008; Selwyn, 2015; 2020; Gray, 2016; Hope, 2016; Wittman, 2016; Åkerblom, 2019; Kauppila et al, 2020).

More interestingly, perhaps, the signs of biocreep and the extension of the discourse outlined above into new areas leads us to different conclusions. Starting with the rationale for the 2022 White paper, we are told (UK Government, 2022b) that “growth” has been “transformative” but not “uniform” (pp1-2). Many have “largely taken on the challenge of underperformance” (p.13), with improving inspection grades (see above). It claims that we now know how to “drive better outcomes” with evidence, feedback and input, as well as how to “harness and grow effective practice” and “transform outcomes” in a uniform way (p. 17). Because it has proved impossible to “drive sufficient improvement” everywhere, it is “vital therefore” to take a “single regulatory approach” to quality and accountability (p.19). Poor schools should be “unstuck” and “sustainable school improvement” through “internal structures” that “relentlessly” pursue educational transformation (ibid).

This ameliorative rhetoric assumes a teleology which soon develops into a quasi-religious zeal “enshrined” in each MAT’s articles, practices and ethos (p.19). It also extends into the repositioning of education as a question of biological hygiene redolent of a pseudo-Darwinian “survival of the fittest”:

Our *strongest* MATs do this most effectively – *creating* economies of scale, re-investing *surpluses* and sharing *resources* and facilities across the trust to *build resilience* and *strong financial health*. By *centralising* operational and administrative functions, schools within a MAT can *save time and*

⁷ In the UK, an academy is a school which is run by an academy trust but receives funding directly from the government. They have more control over provision than schools which remain under “local authority” control; they also have more freedom over curriculum, recruitment and exclusion policies. Pressure has existed for several years towards “academicization”: schools funded by the local authority deemed as ‘inadequate’ by the schools regulator (Ofsted) must change into academies (UK Government, 2022a). This depiction of academies – often agglomerated into Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) - as guarantors of quality (e.g. Williamson, 2021; UK Government, 2022; DFE, 2022a) has been widely challenged, as I show above.

money which can be *reinvested directly* into the areas which have the greatest impact on children’s outcomes (including *unlocking capacity* to support *weaker* schools).

(op cit,p.26 – my emphasis)

Thus the 2022 White Paper’s rhetoric exhibits biocreep: the language of robustness, strength, creation and surplus is used to depict a self-sustaining system whose advantages can be speedily deployed for financial gain. Announced as “harnessing the incredible energy and expertise of the one million people that work in schools” (DFE, 2022b), the White Paper itself starts with the Education Minister, Nadeem Zahawi, discussing how he had to “manage my energy” in order to “move forward” (DFE, 2022a, p.3). Now this “mission to level up opportunity” and eliminate “entrenched underperformance” has “transformed” schools, “revolutionised” practice and set students “on a path for success” (ibid.).

After a barrage of statistics and numerical data, we are then told that the “mission” is to deliver a trust-led system to “drive up standards” by facilitating “the growth of strong trusts”, supporting local authorities “empowered” to help children, and increase funding with “these steps” designed to help children to “achieve their potential” by implementing “the wider vision” of providing everyone with “the opportunity to flourish” (DFE, 2022a, p. 10). At the same time, the promise is to “insulate against particularly bad outcomes for personal wellbeing” (DFE, 2022c, p.4).

We can see that the language of biopolitics is creeping into the sector with familiar terms reoccurring systematically⁸. Individually unsurprising, as co-text, this recurring lexis expresses biopower’s creeping encroachment into secondary education and, therein, “amplify progress” through things like seamless collaboration, longer school days and self-regulating resource banks (DFE, 2022a, pp. 44-45).

As the 2022 White Paper moves on to specifics, we see how this discourse forms the way particular practices are depicted:

Literacy and numeracy are the bedrock of a great education, *unlocking* the whole curriculum and *turbocharging social mobility*. They are the *essential* tools which allow children to *go on to further* training and employment, and

⁸ Including, with occurrence in brackets: “mission” (29); “drive” (23); “power” (13); “potential” (13); “strong/strengthen” (53/11); “flourish” (3); “grow” (6) and “thrive” (3).

to live *fulfilled* lives. They are the *gateway* to the broad and *rich* curriculum children need.

(DFE, 2022a. p.11, *my emphasis*)

This insistence that a unique set of skills will “unlock” everything else and “turbocharge” mobility (speeding up speed, by ““amplifying progress”, as we have seen) is all the more telling when described as *essential* i.e. part of the object’s essence. This essence is to move towards lives which, like prophecy, are *fulfilled*. The desire to improve behaviour and reduce absence and exclusions should be seen in the same light, as a way of ensuring seamless, collective adherence to a project where nothing is wasted. As predicted, this inclusivity implies compulsory education on relationships, sex and health and “Designated Safeguarding Leads” to ensure that provision is seamless and constantly improved (see DFE, 2022a, pp. 25-26;32; 41; 58 for example). Indeed, avoiding wasting such resources, making sure that no-one is “behind”,⁹ becomes a moral crusade:

Following the sacrifices young people made during the pandemic there is – now more than ever – a moral imperative to ensure no child is short-changed on their time in school.

(DFE, 2022a, p.27. [see also p. 46])

Analysis

Examining the development of biopolitical discourse between these two White Papers raises several points about in the wider area of education policy research as we leave the Covid-19 pandemic.

First, the existence of vitalistic tropes in the 2021 FE White paper, accompanied as it was with a set of similar announcements at a specific time, was suggestive of a significant turn in Further Education policy discourse. Running parallel to a crisis-level concern with public health, it was noteworthy to see education policy also develop a concern for biological hygiene. Such correlations (e.g. between health and education policymaking at times of change) are clearly worthy of further investigation.

Second, while the existence of biopolitical discourses in a sector such as Further Education may not surprise us, it is striking to see them at the heart of developments in secondary

⁹ Behind is mentioned 18 times

education. Vitalistic assumptions about innate powers to exploit, mystical teleologies and missions to complete, and a desire to accelerate these processes, all smack of biopolitical encroachment. The extent to which such developments are detectable elsewhere is also worthy of further enquiry.

Finally, by claiming that the first two points represent “biocreep”, I want to suggest that this movement between policies is, also, worthy of examination. We know that discourses do not operate in isolation, but rather in what Deleuze and Guattari call “collective assemblages of enunciation”. No enunciation is entirely individual, Deleuze and Guattari (2004, pp. 85-88) argue, since language functions within collective apparatuses to ensure that the channels of power remain open. “Order-words”, they assert, are key here as statements which function within such assemblages to maintain the flow in the same direction and with the same objects. Thus, while Foucault’s appraisal of biopolitics needs to be understood as essentially ambivalent (Lorenzini, 2020),¹⁰ for Deleuze and Guattari there is little reason to believe that the kinds of seamless spaces created in this way are anything other than oppressive (op.cit.143). Because life itself does not speak (but listens and waits), each order word carries “a little death sentence” (op. cit. 84-85). Thus the smooth spaces described by biopower as spaces of social mobility are illusory: its attempts to accelerate everything will not set us free because the spaces of fast, virtual capital prioritises the construction of pipelines, channels and pathways to guarantee only its own mobility. Indeed, after realising the inefficiency of enclosures and incarcerations in a disciplinary world, for Deleuze (1990) these flows are integral to the governmentality of a control society (see also Masschelein and Simons, 2015; Simons, 2021).

This may help explain why biopolitical discourse is so seductive. It is hard to argue with a policy that puts life at its centre, offering the hope of care, support and joined-up government to a population treated as a whole. However, it’s important to remember that this seamless educational approach to virtual capital comes at a creeping cost. Biopolitics’ order-words positions people - and society more widely - as purely *biological* entities. Claiming to “unlock” our “potential” by “harnessing the incredible energy” only seeks to “benefit [our] mental health and resilience” in order to ablate the moral, emotional and above all social

¹⁰ As an *epistemic* development biopolitics cannot be considered *objectively* better or worse than any other form of politics. Our ethical response to such policy is not, *per se*, a biopolitical question. That said, like vitalism, biopolitics has fascistic overtones and is explicitly tied to with acts of violence, war and genocide as the flip side of health and social care, birth control and general hygiene measures (Foucault, 1976a, p.179). Any entity, moreover, which tries to slow down the drive to extract living potential will come under fire (Foucault, 1976b, pp. 15-16). Biopolitics is therefore not merely a means of general population management, but a means of governance in existential conflict with its own subjects (Foucault, 1976b, pp. 53; 76).

multiplicities which cannot (yet) be efficiently exploited. These costs can be categorised as *instrumentation*, *administration* and *evacuation*, each of which is linked to the three problems evoked above

The costs and problems of biocreep

First, *instrumentation* by biopolitics means treating wellbeing as a means, not an end. Its ultimate goal is the acceleration of capital. This is why the *problem-subject* is constructed: biopolitics *effects* subjects that must be *affected* in order to access the potential value that they embody. One can see why policy might work this way: focussing on human wellbeing in this uniquely instrumental way distracts us from the negative consequences of this unending, relentless quest to “amplify progress”, as we have seen. These consequences are human (the cost of “keeping up”), social (the cost of alienation) and of course environmental (the cost of unbridled resource exploitation). We can also expect biocreep to present unpredictable costs that will only become tangible over time as problem-subjects themselves are exhausted.

Second, as the White Papers show, this focus on life is in reality a focus on the *administration* of life. This can be understood as the need to manage value extraction where the latter is a manufactured problem to be solved. Essentially administrative in nature, this management implies greater surveillance, control and regulation, not to mention the sterile, panoptic environments they require to monitor seamless activity in a seamless way. The costs to mental and emotional wellbeing of such smooth spaces, while hard to quantify, are significant. Above all, biopolitics implies a medicalisation of societal structures wherein social phenomena are literally *treated* aetiologically. At the limit, education under these circumstances no longer involves provision or even delivery but, like medicine, *administration* to solve the problem of how to guarantee the flow of value from healthy bodies.

Third, biopolitics’ construction of the (in)dividual as biological unit involves the *evacuation* not just of any non-biological aspects of life (social, moral or emotional existence), but also of the relational multiplicity which binds them together. This matters because it represents a neo-colonial mindset according to which entities are evacuated of their relational existence to facilitate exploitation. From an educational perspective, any attempt at wholistic approaches to learning risk being foreclosed as educational processes are redefined as the set of normalising techniques required to mould a set of appropriately – and uniformly - empty bodies: biocreeps.

However, the former implies an active agency behind policy which draws analysis closer to conspiracy theory than rational critique. Such ends are not unavoidable simply because their terms – individual

bodies and the assemblages that compose them – are themselves emergent structures. Biopolitics may want docile subjects, but it cannot at the same time postulate the innate creativity of the citizens it creates and ignore the excess that they express.

As Thompson et al (op.cit, p.699) suggest there are (at least) three reasons why we cannot afford to ignore this excess: not only do we not know what desire flows through such entities; we do not know how it flows; nor do we know how various desires interact to produce new forms. And given the complexity of these structures, it is likely that these kinds of silence will remain.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how biopolitics can be described as vitalistic. Like vitalism, biopolitics believes that some mystical life force drives existence from within towards a teleologically determined higher goal. It also believes that this force can be exploited and that its telos is the financial profit accrued by investment in virtual capital.

However, biopolitics itself is not new: claiming that it is merely perpetuates the idolatry of novelty. Marx famously compared the magic of the production of value to that of a sorcerer no longer able to control his own dark powers (Marx and Engels, 2002, p.225), implying that “metaphysical capitalism” works by occupying virtual spheres of value creation (see also Lash, 2007; Toscano, 2007). On this view, biopower is synonymous with capitalism, which has always sought out these margins where value is about to be created, investing in the new, the different and the divergent, and trusting that future profits will appear, seemingly magically, over time. The effacement of individuality in this “dismemberment of existence” is well documented (see for example Henry, 1976, p. 518).

Educational developments are concerned here when, for instance, the knowledge or learning society turns to virtual and online “metaverses” and the continuing harvesting of creativity and innovation to solve existential threats (e.g. climate change). These examples of a turn away from physical labour, products and existence involve and a turn towards their more profitable virtual counterparts. Such “knowledge capitalism” may not be new, but its belligerence towards the non-biological (political dissent, individual choice and social heterogeneity) offers us a glimpse into the discourse of biopolitics as it makes its way into the language, practices and structures of educational institutions.

References

Extras still to be incorporated:

Coercion & surveillance etc

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Policy Across borders

Relation-forming away from spaces defined by national boundaries; the increasing porosity of such boundaries; and an accelerating transfer and diffusion of transnational policies beyond and across borders (Decuyper and Lewis, 2021, p.1)CB says: *not just geographic but personal and affective borders which it seeks to create and manage* .

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