

Quality of life and the politics of human subjectivity

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In recent years, sociological examinations of frontier technologies such as genetics, therapeutic cloning and tissue engineering have suggested that 'life itself' is currently being transformed through technique with profound implications for the ways in which we understand and govern ourselves and others. In this paper, I argue that with the birth of 'quality of life' out of modernisation critiques in the 20th century, the two poles of bio-power initially proposed by Foucault (anatomy-politics and bio-politics) have been reconfigured by a psy-politics of the human mind and an anthropo-politics of collective consciousness. While the first two poles address 'life itself' as their object, the latter two make possible various technologies for the optimisation of 'human subjectivity itself'. As a consequence, to live is not 'merely' to biologically subsist, it is also to experience and enjoy that life, to cope with its vicissitudes, to unfold the human subjectivity potentials that it makes possible and indeed to function in ways requisite to healthy subsistence and existence. In the same way that life and its mechanisms were brought into a realm of explicit calculations during the course of the past few centuries, so too has human subjectivity and its mechanisms through hitherto unprecedented psychological, sociological and anthropological efforts to map these subjectivities out in both their individual and collective forms, which in turn has made them amenable to awareness-raising, empowering or participatory interventions. By analysing the concrete ways in which human progress has been globally measured and taxonomised in the past two centuries or so, I will show how new global stratifications of countries according to their states of 'human development' rely not just on the GNP per capita and life expectancy of national populations but now also on the 'human capability' and 'quality of life' of populations as indicators of human progress.