"Birth of the (Bio)Police": what can Foucault teach us about the police?

"Nacimiento de la (bio)policía": ¿Qué nos dice Foucault sobre la Policía?

Sandro Cozza Sayão[*]
João Jânio da Silva Lira[**]
Marcio Roberto Cavalcanti da Silva[***]

Abstract: This paper investigates the concept of police in the political writings of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Considering in particular his work *Security, territory, population* (1977-1978), we intend to analyze the thesis that modern governmentality enabled the formation of "political technologies of individuals", on whose foundation the control of territory and population are connected. By passing the readings of *Discipline and punish* (1975), which reduces the police to the image of vigil and punishment, and encompassing the ideas developed in Foucault's biopolitical program, the concept of police gains new contours and depth when considered within a history of governmentality. In this sense, here the concept of police will be appreciated as the "means"

[*] PhD in Philosophy, professor at the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE), head of the Philosophy Department, and coordinator of the Virtus Program: Social Defense, Public Security, and Human Rights. Professor of the Post-graduate Program in Philosophy (Master and Doctoral). ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6656-187X. sandro.sayao@ufpe.br.

[**] Master's Degree in Philosophy at the UFPE and philosophy teacher at the Alagoas Department of Education (SEDUC-AL). ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8045-6619. joao.jlira@ufpe.br.

[***] PhD Candidate in Criminal Law at the University of Lisbon, Master's Degree in Human Rigths at the UFPE, researcher at Virtus Program: Social Defense, Public Security, and Human Rights. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4024-0386. marciorobertos@edu.ulisboa.pt.

Sandro Cozza Sayão, João Jânio da Silva Lira & Márcio Roberto Cavalcanti da Silva

through which the generalization of bios through biopolitics was promoted. The sustained hypothesis is that the archaeogenealogical foundations through which the police came to be established in modernity allowed us to think of the police beyond the vigilant and punitive image, but as a mechanism subject to biopower, thus allowing us to define them as (bio)police. Thus, this research shows Foucault's in-depth reflections on the birth of the modern police and its relationship with biopolitics, proposing a new reading in the concept of policy inside Foucauldian thinking. In the meantime, the concept of the (bio)police is defined to account for the "treatise on the police" developed by Foucault in addition to the work *Discipline and punish*.

Keywords: Biopolitics/biopower, (bio)police, Police, History of governmentality, Michel Foucault.

Resumen: Este artículo investiga el concepto de policía en los escritos políticos del filósofo francés Michel Foucault. Considerando, en particular, la obra Seguridad, territorio, población (1977-1978), se pretende analizar la tesis de que la gubernamentalidad moderna permitió la formación de "tecnologías políticas de los individuos", sobre cuya base están conectados el control del territorio y la población. Al trascender las lecturas de Vigilar y castigar (1975), que reducen la policía a la imagen de vigilancia y castigo, y al abarcar las ideas desarrolladas en el programa biopolítico de Foucault, el concepto de policía adquiere nuevos contornos y profundidad cuando se lo considera dentro de una historia de la gubernamentalidad. En este sentido, el concepto de policía se aprecia como el "medio" a través del cual se promovió la generalización del "bios" mediante la biopolítica. La hipótesis sostenida es que los fundamentos arqueogenealógicos a través de los cuales la policía llegó a establecerse en la modernidad permitieron pensar la policía más allá de la imagen vigilante y punitiva, esto es, como un mecanismo sujeto al biopoder, lo que permite definirla como (bio)policía. Así, esta investigación saca a la luz las reflexiones profundas de Foucault sobre el nacimiento de la policía moderna y su relación con la biopolítica, con lo que se propone una nueva lectura del concepto de policía dentro del pensamiento foucaultiano. Paralelamente, el concepto de (bio)policía se define para dar cuenta del "tratado sobre la policía" desarrollado por Foucault más allá de la obra Vigilar y castigar.

Summary. *I. Introduction. II. The police function: governing population vitality through biopolitical rationality. III. Police and the "European balance". IV. Police, urban regulation, and the biopolitics of the market: governing circulatory flows in Foucault's security apparatus. V. Conclusions. References.*

I. INTRODUCTION

A thorough examination of Foucault's work –extending beyond *Discipline and punish* (*Surveiller et Punir*, 1975) to include texts such as *Society must be defended* (*Il faut défendre la société*, 1976), *Security, territory, population* (1978), and *The birth of biopolitics* (1979)– reveals what may be described as his innovative authenticity. In these lecture-based texts, Foucault presents the police not merely as an instrument of repression but as a complex apparatus situated at the intersection of biopower and governmentality. By 1978, he argued that the police had become a central mechanism for regulating populations, embodying a form of "political rationality" that extended beyond surveillance. He described the police as a "political technology of individuals", oriented toward managing health, safety, and welfare, and thereby integrally connected to systems of social control (Foucault, 2007). Within this framework, the police evolve according to the state's logic of power, deploying techniques that bind political integrity to the preservation of state order (Rodrigues, 2013).

However, any discussion of "police" in Foucault's thought must be approached with caution. First, the dominant association of his work with the panoptic model in *Discipline and punish* has led to a reductive interpretation of Foucault as simply a critic of policing institutions. Second, a substantial

interpretative gap persists in the literature. Apart from a few exceptions –such as Lacerda (2009), Rodrigues (2013), Castro (2009, 2019), and Lira and Sayão (2022)–, most scholars overlook in-depth analyses of the police concept.

In *Vocabulário Foucault*, Castro (2009) observes that Foucault uses the terms *police* and *Polizeiwissenschaft* over 200 times, with 176 instances appearing in *Security, territory, population* alone (Lira, 2023). Yet, despite this frequency, Castro's glossary, like most secondary literature, does not systematically explore the term. This neglect reflects a broader tendency to focus on Foucault's middle period –particularly *Discipline and punish*– rather than his later biopolitical work, where policing emerges as a "brief treatise on modern governance" (Castro, 2019, p. 192). Crucially, Foucault's analysis presents the police not just as a repressive tool but as a "biopolitical technology" that mediates between population management and state rationality. This conceptual development, particularly evident in his lectures from 1977 to 1979, remains largely underexplored in mainstream Foucault scholarship.

During the 1970s, Foucault delivered two significant lectures that examined police apparatuses: *The political technology of individuals* (1976) and *Omnes et Singulatim: toward a critique of political reason* (1979). Although methodologically distinct, both texts build upon the analytical foundations of his 1978 course, *Security, territory, population*, especially its account of police institutions as embodiments of governmental rationality. In the March 29th and April 5th lectures, Foucault outlines the "dual emergence" of modern policing: first, as a dispositif that mediates between sovereign power and population management from the 16th to the 18th century; and second, as a technical apparatus redefined by the logic of security from the 18th century onward. This historical analysis frames police and government as "co-constitutive operators"

in the evolution of modern political rationality –initially through disciplinary mechanisms, and later through security dispositifs.

Nevertheless, key epistemological questions remain unresolved: How did governmental rationality, as techne, lead to the institutionalization of police across diverse European state formations? How did different polities converge on policing models capable of managing market systems, food distribution, and transportation infrastructure? Foucault's framework suggests an answer through the concept of "police biopolitics": the integration of governmental imperatives with the self-organizing dynamics of populations, such as economic flows, urban environments, and public health. This biopolitical infrastructure allowed states to regulate life itself via diffuse administrative mechanisms.

This article offers a critical analysis of Foucault's concept of "police" as it developed during his so-called "political turn" (1971–1979), focusing on his Collège de France lectures and published works from that period. In parallel, we engage with contemporary scholars whose divergent analytical approaches help illuminate the historical processes through which policing has come to underpin modern governance. To articulate this theoretical framework, we introduce the neologism *(bio)police*, a conceptual tool that captures both the epistemological depth of Foucault's critique and its intrinsic connection to biopolitical rationalities[1].

---

[1] Although it is not the focus of this article to discuss the relationship between the police and biopolitics, it is essential to emphasize their intrinsic connection. During the 1970s, Foucault developed the concept of biopower (which later evolved into biopolitics), whose traits and practical characteristics were applied to the life (bios) of individuals within a specific territory (population) to organize and coordinate it in pursuit of state "aggrandizement" (a term Foucault uses to denote expansionist governance). For Foucault, the police emerged as one of these technologies alongside the diplomatic-military apparatus and the Christian pastorate. These

II. THE POLICE FUNCTION: GOVERNING POPULATION VITALITY THROUGH BIOPOLITICAL RATIONALITY

Michel Foucault places the idea of "police" within a dense network of power relations and governmental rationalities, traced through his historiographical study of European statecraft in the 17th and 18th centuries. His analysis shows that police apparatuses are not simply repressive tools of sovereign authority; they operate as pervasive disciplinary mechanisms that permeate the social body. Using a genealogical method, Foucault explains how police functions became inseparable from social organization, managing daily life through biopolitical regulation of populations rather than relying solely on juridical prohibition (Castro, 2019).

This shift from sovereign to governmental power appears in the police's growth into areas such as public health administration, epidemiological surveillance, and processes of social normalization. By examining the rise of governmentality, Foucault redefines law as only one element within a larger set of regulatory practices, where the constant optimization of life processes outweighs mere legal codification. The police apparatus thus becomes a prime biopolitical technology, guiding what Foucault calls "the conduct of conduct" through fine-grained interventions into both collective life and individual subject formation.

Foucault's notion of "police" moves beyond standard juridical-institutional meanings, serving as a key point in his archaeology of biopolitical governance. The term marks a broad governmental rationality that

---

tools arose with the advent of population biopolitics. Thus, analyzing the concept of the police in Foucauldian thought is only possible through the lens of biopolitics.

spreads through many layers of social life via regulatory structures aimed at public health, economic circulation, moral normalization, and cultural reproduction (Castro, 2019). This framework reveals a historical dialectic: medieval police relied on coercive bodily discipline (15th-16th centuries), while the early-modern form (17th-18th centuries) became a set of subtle security technologies, shaping conduct by managing environments, an evolution that lays bare modernity's paradoxes of governance.

In that sense, Foucault's distinction between police regulations and civil legislation is central. Police ordinances act as provisional administrative measures that address transient details ("things of every moment"), unlike statutory law's enduring rules over foundational social structures (Foucault, 2008). This dual operation becomes clear in the passage from monarchical sovereignty to market-based governmentality. Where feudal police drew legitimacy from the "will of the king", modern police functions reorganize around the "will of the market", reflecting capitalism's self-regulating ideal of "free" economic agency. This epistemic break shifts police activity from direct sovereign enforcement toward indirect biopolitical optimization: market logics become naturalized tools for governing populations.

Consequently, the governmental apparatus moves from explicit juridical prohibition to implicit environmental conditioning, with police technologies concentrating on encouraging "spontaneous" market conformity rather than suppressing dissent. Through this lens, Foucault shows how liberal governance in modernity deepens regulatory reach while masking its operations through discourses that portray market forces as natural.

Moreover, Foucault identifies an epistemic break in governmental reasoning that reconceives populations as dynamic economic variables rather than fixed regulatory subjects. The tension between sovereign will and market logic produces a biopolitical shift in which the "optimized quantity" arises through market-mediated interactions among productive capacity, necessary consumption, and price equilibrium (Foucault, 2008). Likewise, policing techniques move from direct bodily discipline to environmental modulation of population flows aligned with market self-regulation; and the state's role changes from imposing territorial discipline –extracting collective strength through numerical control– to designing conditions in which individual welfare coalesces into systemic equilibrium (Foucault, 2008).

On the other hand, instead of directly seeking the "best life for all" through police ordinances, neoliberal governance adopts market rationality as its implicit calculus: the state intervenes only to optimize settings where market dynamics autonomously generate collective benefits. This "non-interventionist intervention" marks the transition from a disciplinary society to a security apparatus, positioning populations as both subject and object of economic processes valued for productive potential rather than numerical totality.

Foucault further traces a shift in police purpose from anatomo-politics (control of individual bodies) to biopolitics (management of populations). 17th-century disciplinary paradigms used police as corrective instruments, while 18th-century security apparatuses reconfigure policing into mechanisms of systemic self-regulation: the state abstains from shaping individuals yet engineers structural conditions for the spontaneous emergence of collective welfare (Foucault, 2008). This "interventionist non-intervention" –allowing population flows within controlled economic and health parameters– typifies

neoliberal governmentality, transforming police from bodily repressors to environmental modulators that align apparent individual freedom with state rationality.

This is how biopolitics turns from correcting bodily deviations to statistically managing collective life by optimizing demographic flows of health, migration, and productivity. Power is exercised not over life but through it: security replaces discipline as police coordinate economic, sanitary, and urban systems that induce population self-regulation within desirable statistical thresholds. Consequently, governance operates through environmental architectures where individual agency converges with systemic imperatives, rendering police present as ecological engineers yet absent as direct coercive agents; a paradoxical presence that sustains neoliberal rationality through modulated freedom.

> You can see how, through this discussion on cereals, on the cereal police, on the means of avoiding food shortages, what we see being outlined is a whole new form of governmentality, opposed almost end-to-end to the governmentality that had been outlined in the idea of a police state. (Foucault, 2008, p. 466)

In his study of governmentality, Foucault critically traces its historical development, emphasizing the role of the police as a crucial, though often overlooked, element in the formation of governance structures from the 18th century onward. While not the central focus of his work, the police appear as a foundational institution through which political governmentality is expressed. At the same time, Foucault highlights the underlying influence of economic rationality in shaping modern governance: "The governmentality of politicians

will give us the police, the governmentality of economists will, in my opinion, introduce us to some of the fundamental lines of modern and contemporary governmentality" (Foucault, 2008, p. 468). This marks the transition from sovereign rule to technocratic systems of control.

In his April 5, 1978, lecture, Foucault outlines the dual development of policing between the 17th and 18th centuries. He characterizes it first as a disciplinary apparatus within 17th-century societies, then as a security mechanism in the emerging regulatory regimes of the 18th century. This conceptual shift aligns with the rise of biopolitics, which, as he argues in *The history of sexuality, vol. 1* (1978/1988), initially takes shape as "anatomo-politics" (the micro-level regulation of individual bodies) before extending to population-wide governance. Within this framework, the police play a central role in implementing both disciplinary and biopolitical logics: enforcing norms while simultaneously managing populations through statistical surveillance, economic regulation, and risk control strategies. This transformation recasts the police as a means of containing systemic "illegalisms", not simply by suppressing criminal behavior but by strategically channeling disorder in ways compatible with capitalist productivity. In mediating between sovereign authority and liberal governance, the police apparatus becomes central to what Foucault calls the "economy of illegalities", encapsulating the paradox of modern statecraft: producing order through managed disequilibrium.

The transformation of the police reveals how disciplinary power is reconfigured under neoliberal governmentality. The 18th-century hyper-regulatory apparatus, once focused on optimizing individual bodies, evolves into a system of self-regulation, where standardization enables adaptive governance. This shift replaces rigid behavioral codes with flexible security

frameworks that allow populations to move autonomously within neoliberal limits of productivity, demographic balance, and public health. It also calls for a reassessment of the 17th-century paradigm of spatial and civic control, as policing divides into two functions: (1) macro-level biopolitical systems that extend state power through econometric governance –such as labor market adjustments, epidemiological monitoring, and demographic planning– and (2) residual disciplinary mechanisms that address statistical deviations from neoliberal norms, including crime suppression and disorder management.

In that sense, Foucault (2008) describes this reconfiguration as the fragmentation of classical police aims into decentralized regulatory institutions, where the focus shifts from direct intervention to the promotion of "vital" behaviors through incentive-based strategies. Traditional policing is thereby reduced to a reactive role, responding only when self-regulating markets, health systems, and urban infrastructures fail to manage exceptions. This exemplifies the paradox of neoliberal governance: the promise of maximal individual "freedom" within tightly controlled biopolitical environments.

Foucault's conceptualization of the police apparatus presents it as a dual mechanism of statecraft: it simultaneously strengthens state power through economic governance (regulation of commerce, urban design, and population dynamics) and suppresses disorder by managing illegalisms and deviance. This duality reflects an internal tension within modern policing: its "object", in Foucauldian terms, is the optimization of productive forces under capitalist development, while its "function" is the negative management of security through the containment of abnormality.

According to Foucault (2008), the 18th-century transformation of policing reduces its earlier totalizing mission – "making the force of the state grow while respecting the general order"– to a series of limited interventions that sustain the illusion of autonomous self-regulation within carefully constructed biopolitical systems. By situating this shift within the broader trajectory from Classical Age governmental rationality to modern depoliticized security frameworks, Foucault identifies the police as both a product and agent of governmentality: a political technology that naturalizes state power through its oscillation between economic incentivization (labor and demographic management) and punitive exceptionality (responding to systemic disruptions). In this sense, policing is not simply law enforcement but a dispersed mechanism of power that redefines sovereignty through the economization of life itself.

> In other words, it can be said that the new governmentality that, in the 17th century, had believed it could apply itself entirely to an exhaustive and unitary police project, now finds itself in such a situation that, on the one hand, it will have to refer to a domain of naturalness: the economy. It will have to be administered to the population. It will also have to organize a legal system that respects freedom. Finally, it will have to be equipped with a direct but negative instrument of intervention, the police. Economic practice, population management, public law based on respect for freedom and liberties, a police force with a repressive function. As you can see, the old police project, as it had appeared in correlation with the reason of the state, was dismantled, or rather broken down into four elements –economic practice, population management, the law and respect for freedoms, and the police–, four elements that were added to the great diplomatic- military apparatus,

which, in turn, remained unchanged in the 18th century. (Foucault, 2008, p. 476)

Foucault's analysis places the police within the broader governmental rationality of the modern state, a network of apparatuses (economic, demographic, juridical, military, diplomatic) that collectively implement state reason through regulatory and coercive control over individual and collective life. Using his genealogical method, Foucault (2008) rejects ontological essentialism to show how states have historically constructed their social technologies through the strategic interaction of population management, market rationalization, legal codification, and security mechanisms.

The 18th-century police model, which linked economic development ("making the state grow") with the maintenance of civil order ("preventing disorder"), has been recalibrated under neoliberalism, yet its biopolitical foundations remain embedded in current forms of governance. Although Foucault's framework was left unfinished due to his death in 1984, it anticipated the evolution of the dispositif into the hybrid security structures of late modernity, where algorithmic surveillance, risk management strategies, and neoliberal ideas of "freedom" sustain police logics through decentralized systems. The ongoing relevance of this analysis lies not in the continuity of specific institutions, but in the enduring governmental rationality that normalizes state power by transforming security into an economic concern, where "respect for freedoms" and market self-regulation become the very tools through which police power infiltrates everyday life.

III. POLICE AND THE "EUROPEAN BALANCE"

In his 1978 lectures, Foucault (2008) presents three key premises for understanding the police as a governmental apparatus. First, through a genealogical analysis of the term, he defines police as the institutional mechanism of the Classical Era through which states sought to "optimally deploy their sociopolitical capacities" (p. 421), extending far beyond law enforcement to include the management and optimization of populations. Second, he reframes police power as a form of diplomatic calculation; a geopolitical technology that maintains territorial integrity and balances power among competing states through the strategic distribution of force. Third, Foucault identifies statistics[2] as the biopolitical instrument enabling police modernizzation: a rationalizing device that organized diverse social forces into coordinated systems for managing populations and enhancing economic productivity.

This tripartite framework requires careful analysis, beginning with a clarification of foundational terms: how does Foucault's genealogical approach redefine "police" beyond its modern legalistic meaning? By tracing its development from 16th-century cameralist theories to 18th-century administrative science, he reveals the police as the functional extension of

---

[2] The author Candiotto (2010) argues that the demographic expansion of the 18th century drove the development of governmental science and a new economic paradigm, shifting focus away from the familial model. Statistics, which previously operated solely within the scope of monarchic administration under sovereignty, became a fundamental science for this governmental reorientation. As an emerging discipline, statistics revealed that populations exhibit specific phenomena arising from their aggregation,phenomena irreducible to the familial scale. Among these are population-level regularities, such as birth rates, mortality rates, morbidity, endemicity, epidemics, labor dynamics, and wealth accumulation. By quantifying these demographic phenomena and their economic effects, statistics thus rendered the family obsolete as the central economic unit (Candiotto, 2010).

raison d'État: a comprehensive project aimed at cultivating social vitality through constant intervention in labor markets, public health systems, and urban infrastructure.

> A "police" is simply a form of community or association that is, in a word, governed by a public authority, a kind of human society, insofar as something like a political power, like a public authority is exercised over it. [...] Set of acts that govern these communities under public authority. This is how you find the almost traditional expression "police and regiment", "regiment" used in the sense of a way of governing, a way of ruling, associated with the police. Finally, you have the third meaning of the word "police", which is simply the result, the positive and valued result of good government. (Foucault, 2008, pp. 420-421)

Foucault's analysis highlights the deep interconnection between police apparatuses and regulatory systems, both functioning as biopolitical tools that enact hierarchical governmental rationality. Rather than focusing on law enforcement, Foucault conceptualizes police power as the institutional embodiment of "good government", measured by its effectiveness in managing populations. This dispositif evolves in response to changing state rationalities, yet consistently serves the same core function: the spatial organization of power through behavioral regulation.

As Foucault (2008) outlines, the transformation of police during the 16th and 17th centuries marked its shift from a cameralist administrative tool to the operational arm of governmentality. In this process, the police oscillated between being a specialized institution and a pervasive governmental practice. This historical evolution reveals a central paradox: police function both as a

distinct bureaucratic apparatus and as a means by which sovereignty is exercised through everyday spatial controls.

The "good" state is thus realized through the diffuse penetration of police power into the social fabric, where economic productivity and civil obedience become indistinguishable under biopolitical governance. For Foucault, police are not merely enforcers of order but embody the expanding logic of *étatization*, that is, crafting the very conditions for neoliberal subject formation through constant regulatory intervention.

Foucault's genealogical examination of police power is clarified through his analysis of early modern political thinkers such as Turquet de Mayerne and Johann Georg von Hohenthal. Both articulate police as a biopolitical infrastructure for state expansion. Rather than mere instruments of law enforcement, police are framed as totalizing urban technologies that embody state power through spatial and bodily organization. The first author's definition –"the apparatus concerned with ornament, form, and splendor of the city" (Mayerne, 1611, as cited in Foucault, 2008, p. 422)– presents police as a form of aesthetic governance, where city planning becomes political theology by transforming public spaces into displays of state authority. Nevertheless, the second author's formulation –"the ensemble of means serving the splendor of the state and citizens' happiness" (von Hohenthal, 1776, as cited in Foucault, 2008, p. 422)– translates this logic into biopolitical terms, where "happiness" becomes a metric for the productive transformation of individuals into subjects aligned with state goals. This dual conceptualization reveals three key insights in Foucault's thought:

- Police as total governance: police power goes beyond repression to actively produce social order through infrastructural development (e.g., sanitation, architecture, public hygiene) and economic regulation (e.g., labor discipline, market oversight).

- Citizen as biopolitical medium: the aim of "strengthening citizens" reflects a form of neoliberal governmentality in which individuals are managed as human capital whose physical health and civic behavior contribute to state competitiveness.

- Splendor as political epistemology: urban aesthetics and state grandeur operate as visibility regimes that legitimize police power by showcasing bureaucratic competence.

These Enlightenment-era conceptions foreshadow contemporary governance, where police power functions as the mechanism through which government rationality converts human life into state utility; even "splendor" becomes a soft-power technique for internal control. Foucault thus shifts the focus of police studies from institutional history to a critical topology of power, analyzing how spatial organization and bodily discipline give form to political rationality.

These reflections allow us to identify two essential aspects of Foucault's argument. First, his attempt to understand the state is grounded in the importance of territory, more specifically, space. Second, he emphasizes how individuals are integrated into this spatial logic, becoming intrinsic elements of the territory. Within this framework, the police emerge as a political technology central to the art of governing. This technology enables the state to incorporate

individuals into the collective body of the population, transforming them into governable subjects. This leads to the third observation:

> What should the police be? Well, it must adopt as an instrument everything that is necessary and sufficient for this activity of man to be effectively integrated into the state, its forces, the development of the state's forces, and it must do so in such a way that the state can, in turn, stimulate, determine and guide this activity in a way that is effectively useful to the state. (Foucault, 2008, p. 433)

In this perspective, we find the first biopolitical element of the police, which is the inclusion of subjects in the general field of society, integrating them as populationally useful subjects. However, what is clear is that the police act at the level of the population, as Foucault tells us in *The political technologies of individual* (Foucault, 1988b), "the population has been the object of the police since the end of the 18th century". And how will the population be the object of the police? Through a common instrument between the European balance and the organization of the police, which is statistics (a type of state knowledge about itself and other states). "Police and statistics are mutually conditioned and statistics is a common instrument between the police and the European equilibrium" (Foucault, 2008, p. 424). Therefore, statistics became necessary and possible thanks to the police.

> It can be established precisely through the police, because the police, as the art of developing forces, presupposes that each state identifies exactly what its possibilities are, and what its potential is. Statistics become necessary because of the police, but they also become possible because of the police. Because it is precisely the set of procedures put in

place to make forces grow, to combine them, to develop them, it is this whole set, in a word, administrative that will allow us to identify in each state what its forces consist of, where the possibilities for development lie. (Foucault, 2008, p. 424)

Thus, the police and statistics are inseparable. The former as a state apparatus assisted by the latter as a "science" for strengthening state forces. In other words, the police was not only a biopolitical mechanism, but the main mechanism. It was political technology that made it possible to integrate a group of individuals into a space and a territory through a "science" statistics. In other words, the police were integrated into the biopolitical element of the population and, more than that, they served biopolitics insofar as they united the art of governing with the administration of a population.

According to the aforementioned, we can see that the logic of biopolitics was put into practice rather than theorized, since the most visible element of biopolitics is precisely the governmentalization of individual conduct in the collective sphere.

For example, Foucault identifies five "objects of the police" that underpin this conception and which are, roughly speaking, one linked to the other: "the number of citizens", whose aim is the number of men; the quantitative development of the population in relation to the resources and possibilities of the territory that this population occupies; "the necessities of life", in which the aim of the police obviously implies an agricultural policy: multiplying the people of the countryside by reducing taxes, charges, the militia, cultivating land that is not yet cultivated, etc.; "the problem of health", in which it is effectively taken as one of the necessary conditions for individuals to be

able to work, exercise activities, occupy themselves; "watch over the activity of individuals" so that, this way, they can work more and enhance the "economy" of their state; and, finally, the fifth object of the police, "the circulation of goods", the need for which is important precisely so that everything mentioned above has a purpose (Foucault, 2008). In all cases, the quantity factor is central to the reason of the state. Still drawing on Turquet de Mayerne (1611), Foucault comes to a first conclusion about the task of the police.

> Generally speaking, in essence, what the police will have to regulate and what will constitute its fundamental object are all the ways, let's say, in which men coexist in relation to each other. It is the fact that they live together, that they reproduce, that they need a certain amount of food and air to breathe, to live, to subsist, that they work, that they work alongside each other, in different or similar trades, that they are in an urban space of circulation, it is (to use a word that is anachronistic in relation to the speculations of the time) all this kind of sociality that must be the task of the police. (Foucault, 2008, pp. 437-438)

Foucault reconceptualizes police power as a biopolitical apparatus focused on managing the societal metabolism, the organized regulation of human life to maximize the vitality of the state. Far from being limited to law enforcement, the police function as a comprehensive regulatory mechanism that governs the full range of social relations: interpersonal interactions, environmental engagements, and spatial arrangements (Foucault, 2008). This logic of operation resembles Christian pastoral governance in its all-encompassing reach, but diverges in purpose: rather than aiming for spiritual salvation, police power seeks to harmonize territory through continuous intervention in population trends, economic activity, and public health systems.

Its primary goal is not the protection of the population as such, but the self-reproduction of the state, that is, transforming living individuals into strategic resources through bureaucratic processes.

The police apparatus carries out its function through a dual demographic mandate: quantitative increase – "the number of citizens is the first object of the police" (Foucault, 2008, p. 435)– and qualitative improvement. This requires a delicate balance, that is, ensuring enough population growth to sustain state operations while avoiding overpopulation that could disrupt economic stability (Foucault, 2008). The focus shifts from mere survival to the optimization of life: citizens are not only to live, but to do so in ways that enhance labor output and economic consumption, thereby boosting state competitiveness. This reveals the paradox at the heart of police rationality: concern for individual well-being is purely instrumental, valued only insofar as it contributes to the strengthening of state structures.

That way, Foucault locates the central biopolitical challenge of police power in achieving what he calls "productive equilibrium", a form of social order that self-regulates through spatial and organizational design rather than overt repression. This is realized through dispositifs of managed separation: urban zoning, segmented labor markets, and public health barriers that subtly organize populations while preserving the appearance of freedom. Foucault emphasizes this model as a solution to the paradox of liberal governance (exercising maximal control with minimal visible coercion); and, by embedding regulatory functions into the built environment and everyday practices, police power presents itself as a necessary condition of life rather than a political force, achieving social equilibrium through dispersed spatial governance rather than centralized command.

IV. POLICE, URBAN REGULATION, AND THE BIOPOLITICS OF THE MARKET: GOVERNING CIRCULATORY FLOWS IN FOUCAULT'S SECURITY APPARATUS

> You have all the connotations, all the echo phenomena that may exist in these two words and with all the shifts and attenuations of meaning that may have occurred in the course of the 18th century, but, in the strict sense of the terms, policing and urbanizing are the same thing. (Foucault, 2008, p. 453)

Foucault's analysis of police power reveals its foundational connection to urban governance, shaped by the biopolitical logic of market circulation. He identifies a distinctive relationship in early modern statecraft: urban environments and police function as mutually reinforcing mechanisms for regulating both population movement and commodity exchange within emerging market economies (Foucault, 2008). Between the 17th and early 18th centuries, this triad (police, commerce, and urban development) formed an integrated matrix of governmental rationality. The spatial dynamics of the market required police intervention to stabilize sovereignty in the face of unpredictable flows of people and goods.

In that sense, Foucault highlights urban infrastructure –such as streets, squares, markets, and manufactories– as the principal biopolitical domain of police activity. These physical and symbolic spaces allowed the transformation of dispersed individuals into a governable "population" by organizing circulation. Police power thus emerges as an intrinsically urban political

technology, whose function depends on spatial networks of movement and control.

Through his archival research, Foucault shows how 18th-century administrative documents –covering topography, political economy, and urban planning– chart the development of police into a fully articulated biopolitical apparatus. By systematizing economic exchange and labor mobility within the urban grid, police power became the technical extension of *raison d'État*, converting irregular human behavior into manageable demographic data.

This framework offers a critical insight: police theory and practice presuppose an urbanized setting in which the constant movement of people and goods requires continuous regulatory oversight. Rather than serving merely as a repressive force, police power operates as a spatial logic of governance, a mechanism that embeds state rationality into the structure of cities through the coordination of bodies, commodities, and information flows.

> Health, for example, subsistence, [and] all the means to prevent food shortages, [the] presence of beggars, [the] circulation of vagrants - vagrants would only become a problem in the countryside towards the end of the 18th century. Let's say that these are all problems of the city. In more general terms, they are the problems of coexistence and dense coexistence. (Foucault, 2008, p. 451)

Foucault's analysis in *History of madness* set out a direct link between urban space and the biopolitical classification of "non-social" groups: the mad, delinquents, vagrants, and other figures excluded from rising bourgeois norms. The 18th-century idea of "population" as a governable object emerged through these exclusions, marking the shift from 17th-century disciplinary societies to

security apparatuses that regularized market-driven mobility (Foucault, 2008). Foucault termed this shift the bio-historical turn, in which cities became laboratories for policing circulation: not only the movement of bodies, but also the commodified rhythms of labor, trade, and urban life.

Within this regulatory framework, police power functioned as the engine of capitalist urbanization. By managing "the coexistential circulation of goods and men", a process he described as inherently "urban and mercantile", the police evolved into a market institution in its own right. Its mandate exceeded the repression of deviance; it actively shaped environments where commerce could appear to self-regulate under state supervision. The 18th-century city thus stood as a carceral marketplace in which freedom of movement depended on heightened surveillance.

Therefore, Foucault's perspective showed that the prosperity promised by the security society rested on making human vitality legible to market logics, binding policing and political economy together. Once populations were recast as statistical aggregates, the exclusion of the madman and the licensing of the merchant became parallel signs of biopower's urban imprint.

> The police, in their practices and in their institutions, often did nothing more than take up this preliminary urban regulation, as it had developed since the Middle Ages and which concerned the cohabitation of men, the manufacture of goods, the sale of goods. It was therefore a kind of extension of this urban regulation that the police of the 17th and 18th centuries aimed to achieve. (Foucault, 2008, p. 452)

Foucault emphasizes that the rise of police power in the 17th century should not be understood merely as a byproduct of the development of market-

cities. Instead, it marks a decisive transformation in governmental rationality: the market-city became the central framework through which the state intervened in human life, forming the basis of biopolitical governance (Foucault, 2008, pp. 455–456). This period also saw the evolution of anatomo-politics (disciplinary techniques focused on individual bodies) into a broader population biopolitics, aimed at enhancing collective vitality and economic productivity (Foucault, 1988).

That is how, through an analysis of Nicolas Delamare's *Traité de la police* (1738), Foucault shows how urban environments were redefined as police apparatuses responsible for maintaining the "public good". The treatise outlines an extensive regulatory agenda, including:

- Moral and spiritual life: religion, customs, and scientific knowledge.

- Biological needs: health, subsistence, and aid for the poor.

- Spatial organization: buildings, roads, squares, and public order.

- Economic activity: commerce, manufacturing, and labor discipline (servants, artisans).

- Social performance: theater, games, and cultural practices.

This classification reveals police power as an all-encompassing force embedded in every aspect of urban life, transforming the city into a site for biopolitical experimentation. By organizing these "objects of police", Delamare's work codified a governmental rationality in which urban space functioned simultaneously as the medium and the target of state power. The aim was not simply to manage populations but to increase their productivity through spatial regulation. For Foucault, the police thus represent the practical

expression of biopolitics, where the market-city's logic of circulation converges with demographic control to form a new mode of governance.

> [...] If the police are concerned with religion and customs, it is because they are concerned with guaranteeing what he calls the "goodness of life", if they are concerned with health and subsistence, it is because their function is "the conservation of life". Goodness, conservation of life. Tranquility, the care of buildings, the sciences: the liberal arts, commerce, manufactures and the mechanical arts, domestics and laborers, all this refers to the 'comfort of life': the theater and games, the pleasures of life". (Foucault, 2008, p. 450)

Moreover, Foucault identifies the biopolitical governance of life as the core concern of the police apparatus, which operates across a broad spectrum: from intimate spiritual spheres such as religion and customs to material infrastructures like buildings and roads. In 18th-century governmental rationality, police power is redefined as a totalizing mechanism aimed at optimizing vital processes. Its purpose is not simply to ensure survival but to enhance productivity through the regulated circulation of people and goods within urban environments (Foucault, 2008). The police mandate thus involves two interrelated aims: supporting biological existence (health, subsistence) and fostering social prosperity (public order, scientific progress), both subordinated to the logic of *raison d'État* and its pursuit of economic intensification.

Likewise, Foucault locates this shift in the urban setting, where population density and commercial activity demand police intervention to align individual vitality with collective utility. As elaborated in *The birth of biopolitics*, the police apparatus becomes a regulatory system that governs the

metabolism of society, managing bodies at the micro level to maximize labor, and urban design at the macro level to facilitate commodity circulation. Its operational logic is rooted in spatialized control: streets and squares are arenas for regulating movement, while buildings embody structures of surveillance and productivity.

This biopolitical framework reveals the paradox at the heart of police power: it transforms mechanisms of control into symbols of civilizational advancement. By penetrating all layers of life, from religious behavior to urban planning, it legitimizes state intervention through the promise of "better living". Yet, as Foucault emphasizes, this notion of "improvement" is inseparable from market-oriented state rationality, where the city becomes a testing ground for refining techniques of bodily discipline and economic extraction.

V. CONCLUSIONS

When analyzing the concept of police from an archaeogenealogical perspective based on Foucault's work, we see that the police are not placed on a theoretical pedestal; rather, they are contingent and open to critical reflection. In this regard, Foucault (1926–1984) plays a fundamental role. As noted, the French philosopher wrote "a brief treatise on the police" (Castro, 2019), tracing the history of the concept through an archaeogenealogical approach that explores its origins, transformations, and (dis)continuities. The figure of the police appears in Foucault's texts when addressing the security of citizens and the city "against the mad" (Foucault, 1978, p. 92), as a surface of emergence distinct from the figure of the mad individual, with the police emerging to maintain urban order (Castro, 2019, p. 189).

As for Foucault, he revisited the theme during his political research in the late 1970s, particularly in *In defense of society* and *Security, territory and population*, and again in *Birth of biopolitics*, where he considers the police state. These works highlight how governmental reason has historically directed the police both as a disciplinary device and as a state apparatus (Foucault, 2005), later framing it as an instrument for regulating and ordering population circulation in "market cities" (Foucault, 2008, p. 456). Broadly, he defines the police as the set of laws and regulations designed to consolidate, increase, and effectively use state forces through the police mechanism: "It is this articulation that is specific to the police" (Foucault, 2008, pp. 439-440). In form, the police stand out as a device that holds the population in life as the object of a political strategy that ultimately unfolds into biopolitics.

If biopolitics penetrates the detailed aspects of the population with the aim of addressing life itself (as in medical police, for example), the police can be understood as the mechanism that has best realized this goal. For instance, the police oversee religion, not from the perspective of dogmatic truth, but concerning moral quality of life; they manage health and supplies, guarding what sustains life; they regulate commerce, factories, the poor, and the comforts of daily existence. Ultimately, Foucault emphasizes that the object of the "police" is life (Castro, 2009). In other words, life is understood as an indispensable element of the modern subject; the subject who works, interacts, trades, moves, and produces. Life is thus a political and economic element.

From this interpretation of the police's role in the 17th and 18th centuries, it is clear that their object is life, but this is conceived as a political element. This idea aligns with and expands Foucault's concept of biopolitics. Although Foucault did not explicitly conceptualize the police as biopolitics, it

is evident that the police function as a biopolitical element. To conceptualize this relationship, the most fitting definition is biopolitics: a police power that intervenes in individuals' lives to shape them into subjects. This is one of the conclusions of this study: the Foucauldian conception of the police includes elements that identify, transform, and translate it into biopolitics. A key point supporting this conclusion is that, for Foucault, governmentality as a form of government traces back to the logic of quantitative management of life.

While this brief literature review does not analyze the consequences of this insight, it invites reflection on the relevance of Foucault's ideas for understanding current developments in policing. This task could be addressed in future work, including possible applications of police analysis in the context of Latin America. However, as Castro (2019) points out:

> Despite this, it is necessary to take into account, first of all, that Michel Foucault's direct references to Latin American history or thought are certainly scarce. In general, his investigations focus on modern European history, fundamentally in France, Germany, and England, and on the ancient history of Greece and Rome. (pp. 204-205)

Moreover, it is also worth considering that, despite this, its instruments and conceptual elaborations have circulated widely within Latin American studies.

> In this sense, it is enough to bear in mind the projection that his studies have had in Latin America of his notions of panoptism, which marked the reception of *Surveillance and punishment*, and, more recently, that of biopolitics. Foucauldian analyses of the notion of the police, however, have not been widely considered. (Castro, 2019, p. 205)

In this context, it is important to open the debate to the issues raised and to approach the everyday mechanisms of policing through a philosophical lens. Reflecting on police action from philosophical perspectives is both relevant and necessary, as it helps us understand the logic of the police not only as a historical institution but also as an institution composed of individuals who become subjects. Analyzing police action as a practice and uncovering its underlying logic is a challenging task. The complex microphysics of the relationship between the institution and the police subject makes this analysis difficult, whether in police intelligence or academic research. For this reason, studying what the police are and how they are structured beyond the formal apparatus remains a path society has yet to fully explore, and it remains a taboo even within police forces themselves.

This opening is timely, as tactical action alone is no longer sufficient. Both practical interventions and scholarly studies of the police apparatus are needed. Moreover, it is essential to move beyond viewing the police simply as an instrument of state power defined by violence. Instead, the field must be broadened to include diagnosing the police's effects on society.

With this in mind, we present here some possible premises for thinking about the police from their historical and philosophical status. Grounded in a theoretical and conceptual philosophical basis, we aim to understand the police apparatus through an archaeogenealogical approach. Following Foucauldian ideas, we seek to outline potential pathways for diagnosing these issues. Viewing philosophy as a diagnosis of the present, we apply it to the study of the police, two subjects that might initially seem unrelated.

To do this, we rely primarily on the sayings and writings of Michel Foucault, without limiting ourselves to his well-known work *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison*, as is often done. Instead, we use Foucault as a source to think about the police from their fundamental connection to life. It should be noted, however, that this is only one way to understand the police, not the only one. Additionally, the discussion offered here is not exhaustive; rather, it serves as an introduction to the subject from a scientific and philosophical perspective.

REFERENCES

Candiotto, C. (2010). Political Governmentality in Foucault's . Ideas Filosofia Unisinos, 11(1), 33-43. https://revistas.unisinos.br/index.php/filosofia/article/view/4632.

Castro, E. (2009). Vocabulário de Foucault: Um percurso pelos seus temas, conceitos e autores (I. M. Xavier, Trad.). Autêntica Editora.

Castro, E. (2019). La noción de policía en los trabajos de Michel Foucault: Objeto, límites, antinomias. Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura, 46(2), 185-206. https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/achsc/article/view/78218.

Foucault, M. (1981). "Omnes et singulatim": Towards a criticism of political reason. En S. McMurrin, The Tanner lectures on human values (Vol. 2) (págs. 223-254). University of Utah Press. (Trabalho original publicado em 1979).

Foucault, M. (1988). The political technology of individuals. En H. Luther, H. Martin, & H. Patrick, Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault (págs. 145-162). University of Massachusetts Press.

Foucault, M. (2008). Segurança, território, população: Curso no Collège de France (1977-1978) (E. Brandão, Trad.; C. Berliner, Rev.). Martins Fontes .

Lacerda, I. (2009). Foucault, para além de "Vigiar e punir". Revista de Filosofia Aurora, 21(28), 39-58. https://doi.org/10.7213/rfa.v21i28.1135.

Lira, J. J. (2023). Nascimento da (bio)polícia: O surgimento da polícia e(m) sua relação com a biopolítica em Michel Foucault [Dissertação de mestrado, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco]. https://repositorio.ufpe.br/handle/123456789/51981

Lira, J. J., & Sayão, S. C. (2022). (Bio)police: Between the exercise of sovereignty and the birth of a political rationality in Michel Foucault's history of governmentality. Revista de Filosofia Moderna e Contemporânea, 10(1), 271-279. https://doi.org/10.26512/rfmc.v10i1.47752.

Rodrigues, T. (2013). Ecopolítica e segurança: O surgimento do dispositivo diplomático-policial. Revista Ecopolítica, 5, 115-156. https://revistas.pucsp.br/ecopolitica/article/download/15217/11351/0.