

Midwest Faculty Seminar

Death and the Politics of Life

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At its origin, biopolitics may be described, in the words of Michel Foucault, as the power to “make live and let die,” a power that, at the dawn of the modern era, first began to define the societies in which we live. The politics of life have therefore been with us for some time, informing everything from the science of demography to the practice of punishment and the administration of public health. Recently, though, the biopolitics through which our modern societies operate have taken on a peculiar intensity, owing both to the intensification of state intervention in medical care and recent advances in medical technology that make the line between life and death increasingly opaque. Long a part of our history, the technologies to which biopolitics gives rise have finally brought the politics of life to a point of crisis.

This seminar explores the contours of this historical and conceptual terrain, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between biopolitics and contemporary attitudes and approaches to death and the process of dying. First, we will examine the theory of biopolitics as it pertains to the question of death, asking about the ways in which the politics of sovereignty informs the politics of life that is so important to the contemporary political scene. How should we understand the processes by which “life” becomes an object of political control? And how, in particular, can we think about the relationship between the politics of life and the way death is understood across the world today? Second, the seminar looks at death and dying in a comparative context via an examination of death in Christian and Hindu thought. What defines the attitudes towards death that come out of these two very different traditions? How do these separate cultures of death inform the politics through which death is approached by Hindu and Christian publics? And finally, we hope to put these political and cultural arguments about death and the politics of life into conversation with fields such as ministry, medicine, bioethics and end-of-life care. How do doctors manage the often-precarious line between “natural” and “artificial” death in complicated medical situations? How have advances in life-extending medical technologies changed our attitudes about death and dying? What are the links between these practical questions and the broader contexts in which our understanding of life and death take shape?

Many of the approaches outlined here are no doubt substantially different from one another, and many participants may know little of the methods through which some of our presenters approach the questions the seminar seeks to raise. But one of the assumptions of the seminar is that a phenomenon as important and as varied as death can only be examined in a broadly interdisciplinary vein. Our hope, then, is that the different questions it seeks to address may be of interest not only to specialists in individual fields but to those who work with death and dying in fundamentally different ways. If the politics of life does, in fact, define in an important way the modernity in which we live, contemporary shifts in our approaches to death and dying portend fundamental alterations in the foundations of our political life. The seminar, in the end, tries to come to terms with these shifts, and with what they mean for the way we approach life and death in the present.

Speakers will include Kevin Boyd (Divinity), Wendy Doniger (South Asian Languages and Cultures and the Committee on Social Thought), Eric Santner (Germanic Studies), and Daniel Sulmasy (Medicine and Divinity) in addition to faculty from Philosophy and other relevant fields.