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Rational Choice Theory in Light of Biopolitics

Teoria racjonalnego wyboru w świetle biopolityki

ABSTRACT

Both rational choice theory and biopolitics are extremely important paradigms in the social sciences – including political science. It would seem that their basic axioms contradict each other because the influence of biopolitical power microstructures excludes sovereign and autonomous decision-making processes. Thus, the paper adopts the hypothesis that the assumptions of biopolitics falsify the basic axioms of rational choice theory, and therefore we can consider it as the antithesis of rational choice theory. In order to verify the hypothesis, the method of content analysis was applied – with particular emphasis on studies concerning both paradigms and primary sources supported by elements of comparative studies. On the basis of the analyses carried out, it was proved that the assumptions of both paradigms do not have to contradict each other – they may even be complementary. Human actions based on the principle of rationality and self-interest can be justified by the actions of biopolitics, and therefore the hypothesis has been falsified.

Keywords: rational choice theory, modern biopolitics, methodology, paradigms, postmodern biopolitics

INTRODUCTION

Rational choice theory in the 20th and 21st centuries has become an important paradigm in the social sciences – including political science. The most important scientific journals in that field, i.e. the “American Political Science Review”, devote a significant part of their volume to the analysis of rational choice theory [Michalczyk 2004: 275], and the most important representatives of this theoretical perspective such as Thomas Schelling, Gary Becker or Daniel Kahneman were honoured with the Nobel Prize for their research.

Although the rational choice theory has had a significant impact on the social sciences and its presence in the scientific space has steadily increased in recent decades, it also attracts many critics. Some of them advocate only for softening certain behavioural assumptions, while others question the usefulness of rational choice theory altogether [Herfeld 2022: 1–2]. Donald Green and Ian Shapiro, for example, question the empirical results of research based on rational choice theory – they do not reject it altogether, but only point to serious methodological shortcomings, which can be improved in certain ways [see: Green, Shapiro 1994]. From the perspective of this thesis, however, the most relevant is the sociological critique challenging the basic axioms of rational choice theory. Pierre Bourdieu opposed it by arguing that the assumptions of continuous rational calculation of social actors are inherently flawed [see: Bourdieu 2005]. According to the French sociologist, the fundamental determinant of social behaviour is bodily dispositions [Bourdieu 2005].

The juxtaposition of the assumptions of rational choice theory and the biopolitical perspective is extremely important in this context. Both positions – although rarely combined – focus on analogous problems but present them in completely different ways. In the context of individual dispositions and rational decisions at the individual level, the biopolitical approach can even be regarded as the antithesis of rational choice theory. While the former approach assumes a continuous calculation to maximise individual profit, the latter assumes the influence of power microstructures determining human choices and behaviour. Despite this, we can see some common assumptions in both theoretical perspectives. Both rational choice theory and biopolitics assume that the driving force of human action is the reward-punishment axis. For rational choice theorists, i.e. Georges Homans, functioning within social structures is based on egoistic calculation – maximising rewards and minimising punishment. On the other hand, for the representatives of the biopolitical paradigm, i.e. Michel Foucault, the man in social interaction is guided by the fear of punishment – in this sense, his choice is based on discipline rather than rational calculation.

This paper aims to juxtapose the two paradigms operating in the social sciences. The question is posed as to the validity of the basic axioms of rational choice theory in the light of biopolitical theory. The paper adopts the hypothesis that the assumptions of biopolitics (both modern and postmodern) falsify the basic axioms of rational choice theory, and therefore its usefulness in social research is severely limited. The paper adopts a method of content analysis – in particular of primary texts and scholarly studies characterising each perspective. In order to achieve the stated research objectives, the basic assumptions of rational choice theory will first be presented and then juxtaposed with biopolitical theory in two dimensions: modern and postmodern.

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY – BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

When looking for the ideological roots of rational choice theory, it is necessary to go back to the 17th century. At that time, Thomas Hobbes, in his political treatise *Leviathan*, analysed the activities of political institutions on the basis of the individual choices of their representatives, at the same time formulating the thesis that these choices stem from universal instincts [see: Hobbes 2010]. Hobbes's theory thus implied that political decision-makers are guided by their subjective rationality. In later centuries, similar interpretations of socio-political reality appeared from authors such as David Hume, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill [Oppenheimer 2008: 2].

In its modern form, the rational choice theory is mainly associated with economics [Herfeld 2020: 329]. Economists have widely used it to explain and predict a variety of phenomena not only of a purely economic nature – Nobel laureate Gary Becker extended the application of economic analysis to the description of behaviour and mutual relations between people, i.e. marriage, family, egos or altruism [Michalczyk 2004: 276]. In the second half of the 20th century, rational choice theory was further developed and transferred to many other disciplines from evolutionary biology to philosophy, sociology, political science and anthropology [Herfeld 2020: 329]. Representatives of rational choice theory are guided by three basic premises: rationality, utility and self-interest [see: Lalman, Oppenheimer, Świstak 1994: 19–22]. Of course, all of the above are complementary to the claim that politics is a continuous decision-making process. These choices must therefore be rational, and useful from the perspective of the individual.

The premise of rationality assumes that in the decisions that are made, the individual will consciously be able to choose the option that is most beneficial to him. This means that, when making a decision, the individual is aware of all available alternatives and is able to estimate which one will prove to be the most profitable. At the same time, because this decision-maker has to choose the most appropriate solution, all others must also be analysed and consciously rejected. This creates a hierarchy of alternatives referred to by some as axioms of preference [Krstić 2022: 12]. Importantly, the rationality of actors in socio-political life is understood very subjectively – the goals of certain actions are not defined in advance, but rather left for the individual to define [Michalczyk 2004: 277]. Rational action is therefore one that will bring the individual closer to achieving his subjectively defined goals.

The second premise concerns utility, or more precisely expected utility. This is a claim that assumes that, when making a choice, we are exposed to a lottery of outcomes and that a certain action will not always produce the best, desired end result [Lalman, Oppenheimer, Świstak 1994: 20]. Therefore, when making a decision, in addition to potential consequences, we must also consider the probability of their occurrence [Michalczyk 2004: 278].

The premise of self-interest, on the other hand, assumes that human is an egoistic being and will therefore be guided only by his own interests when making decisions. At the same time, it is assumed that when making a decision, he will not consider the effects that a given action will have on other actors in the social system – especially those not related to him. This premise seems justified when it comes to the archetype of rational choice theory – economics. Some authors, i.e. Anthony Downs, have raised the issue of self-interest in relation to political activity. This American theorist assumed that political parties and politicians in a competitive situation in an electoral system based on majority voting seek to maximise votes so as to gain power [see: Downs 1957]. At the same time, such an approach implies that it is not important for political parties and politicians competing in elections to make any changes, but only to win.

By synthesising the theses contained in these three premises, we get a picture of a man who constantly makes conscious, sovereign decisions guided by his own selfish interests. This man approaches life in a rational manner, carefully and exhaustively analysing every aspect of it. He is able to create a hierarchy of values and foresee the potential consequences of certain choices. Thus, in the view of rational choice theorists, human is a constantly calculating, egoistic and autonomous being guided by logic (or emotions, but only when they are the desired goal).

MODERN BIOPOLITICS AND THE THEORY OF RATIONAL CHOICE

In order to articulate the relationship between biopolitics and rational choice theory as precisely as possible, it is first necessary to outline the basic assumptions of the biopolitical paradigm. Biopolitics as a practice of governance has undergone evolutionary processes over the centuries. Pre-modern strategies of sovereign power, whose primary means of governing society was physical disintegration, transformed into modern methods of control by means of cultural, economic and discursive tools. According to Michel Foucault, the possibility of adjudicating life and death evolved into a large-scale training of the body and soul on an unknown before scale [Foucault 2000: 118–122]. Thus, as the aims and methods of power changed, the entire socio-political system was transformed. Among the strategies of modern biopower, the French philosopher distinguished between anatomopolitical power over the body, which controls, manages and invests in the body and soul of the individual with the tools of microphysics of power, and population biopolitics, which focuses on regulating the population – the control of births and deaths, life expectancy and other biological processes [Foucault 2000: 118–122]. In the modern era – before the biotechnological revolution – the anatomopolitical power over the body described by Foucault was limited to the formulation of society-wide prescriptions of norms and behaviour. At that time, individuals functioning within society followed the scenarios set out by authority, for crossing the boundary of “incurable behaviour”

resulted in punishment – for example, social exclusion [see: Foucault 1995]. Modern biopower, thus, sought to shape the soul in order to then shape and control the body [Foucault 1995].

In light of the basic assumptions of modern biopolitics, at least two of the three premises of rational choice theory thus appear questionable. On the one hand, it is the claim of self-interest, which contradicts Foucault's claims that man is subject to the discipline of micro-power, and on the other hand, it is the claim of the rationality of the individual, which in the biopolitical paradigm can be contrasted with the shaping of the soul and the creation of human needs by power structures.

Analysing the validity of the premise of self-interest in the light of the biopolitical paradigm, it should be noted that the claims of representatives of both theoretical currents are basically contradictory. This is because by assuming the functioning of micro-power structures in the form of anatomopolitical power over the body and population biopolitics, the factor of decision-making autonomy is excluded. Rational choice theorists assume that the sovereign decisions of individuals result from the calculation – the aim is to maximise one's own profits. However, it is difficult not to agree with Foucault's thesis that modern society is subject to constant biopolitical control – people's behaviour is internalised from a young age. In the first instance, behavioural patterns are transmitted by means of primary socialisation through the parents (who also previously functioned in a particular social system and thus adopted the rules operating within it) and then by means of secondary socialisation, which – according to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann – is distinguished from the process of primary socialisation by, among other things, the abandonment of biological barriers in the process of learning about the world [Berger, Luckmann 1983: 218]. This abandonment of biological barriers allows disciplinary institutions (e.g. school) [see: Foucault 1995] to create minds or – as Foucault said – human souls. This, in turn, leads us to the observation that human decisions will already be conditioned by socialisation processes. This shaping of the soul, however, does not end with completing the educational process. A human being functioning in a social system is subject to biopolitical authority manifesting itself in all aspects of life, e.g. culture, economy, discourse, etc. Even the most intimate, physiological aspects of life, i.e. sexuality, are subject to discipline [see: Foucault 2000]. Thus, if man adapts his physiology to a functioning socio-political system, he has to wonder whether the decisions he makes serve his own subjectively perceived interest or whether they only serve the interest of (bio)power.

However, we can present this assumption in a completely different way. Indeed, decisions based on rational choice theory do not necessarily have to contradict biopolitical theory. Analysing contemporary consumer society, Mike Featherstone, in the context of the biopolitics of the body, pointed out that today both the body and sexuality are consumer products [Featherstone 2008: 115]. Thus, he stated that the creation of "scripts" for the appearance of the body and its behaviour is in fact a process that serves the biopower to produce a consumer body. The purpose of this

process is to create a demand for certain products for its care. The decision to purchase them can therefore be analysed in two ways. From a biopolitical perspective, the scripts imposed by the authorities, combined with the process of control and discipline, which has been in place since childhood, can compel a person to act in a certain way, for example, to buy specific products. Justifying the same decision from the perspective of rational choice theory, on the other hand, we can say that because society enforces certain actions, it will be rational, reasonable and most profitable to comply – including the purchase of those products. In this sense, rational choice theory does not have to contradict the assumptions of the biopolitical paradigm but can complement it.

A similar situation occurs when we analyse the validity of the premise of the rationality of decision-makers in a biopolitical context. Rationality is understood as the possibility and ability to construct a hierarchy of alternatives and to choose the most appropriate option means, firstly, that a person's decision will be fully sovereign and, secondly, that a person is able to consciously set his individual goals. Assuming that the individual has adequately adapted to the rules of the social system in question – rationality will mean carrying out the dispositions of biopower. If – as mentioned in the introduction – the common denominator of both paradigms is the punishment-reward axis, then adapting to the system will mean maximising gains and minimising losses, and will therefore be the most rational action.

The biopolitical paradigm can thus complement the assumptions of rational choice theory. Biopolitics explains why people behave in certain ways, pointing to the influence of power microstructures as the primary motive. Albert Somit and Steven Peterson, in their search for the relationship between the two theories, noted that rational choice theorists define humans in a certain way without actually specifying why. Biopolitical theory, on the other hand, provides a more complete justification for people's actions [see: Somit, Peterson 1999].

RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY AND POSTMODERN FORM OF BIOPOLITICS

The next stage in the evolution of biopolitics is linked to the development of modern technologies and, unlike the previous transformation, does not imply a re-definition of goals, but only a broadening of the catalogue of means to achieve them and a multiplication of the actors exercising power. According to Gilles Deleuze, the concept of a modern society based on discipline and control has become obsolete. Today's model of power, Deleuze argued, is based on the control exercised through cybernetic networks. It is an offshoot of the transformation of 19th-century capitalism based on productive processes into 20th- and 21st-century capitalism based on services [Deleuze 1992]. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri developed Deleuze's concept in their anti-capitalist and anti-globalist manifesto *Empire*. They saw a great danger in the progressive overlapping of political structures with economic structures. Bio-

politics – in their view – thus means the production of bodies and minds, the aim of which is to maximise the profits of actors operating in the free market [Hardt, Negri 2005: 29]. The insights of Deleuze, Hardt and Negri are important insofar as they show a fundamental transformation in the subject of biopolitical control. Biopower does not only mean the sovereign power of the state, nor the disciplinary society previously formed through the internalisation of norms and scenarios of behaviour, but also the “power of the free market” exercised through economic tools.

In attempting to define postmodern biopolitics, however, it is first necessary to analyse the tools it uses. According to the German sociologist Wolfgang van den Daele, contemporary biopower takes a technocentric form [see: van den Daele 2005]. This means that reproductive medicine, biotechnology, neuroscience, genetics or robotics, among others, are its focus. Accepting the assumption that the core strategies of postmodern biopower revolve around technological innovations does not mean, however, that it abstracts from classical cultural, social and discursive tools. Any claim that marginalises the techniques of biopolitical governance identified by Foucault seems misguided and unjustified. The whole point of the evolution and growth of the importance of contemporary biopower is expressed precisely in the fact that it expands the scope of its activity by means of technological solutions. To put it bluntly, old techniques of biopolitical governance have not been replaced by new ones – technology complements the old practices of biopower.

Postmodern biopolitics is, thus, an improved and expanded version of modern biopolitics. The aim of postmodern biopower is to manage and discipline human beings with the use of modern technologies. Postmodern biopolitics, thus, makes use of social, cultural, discursive and economic tools as well as the latest discoveries from fields such as genetics, biotechnology, medicine, nanotechnology or robotics. Some researchers refer to postmodern biopolitics as “molecular”. Lily Kay, in her work *The Molecular Vision of Life*, argued that molecular biology, and in particular the correction of the human genome, has disciplinary power. In her view, significant developments in genetic research, are created by institutions of power aiming to gain greater control over society [Kay 1993: 282]. Michael Flower and Deborah Heath further argued that the Human Genome Project, a scientific programme since 1990 aimed at understanding and mapping the human genome, is proof of the intertwining of biopolitics with anatomopolitics and the transformation of anatomopolitics into macromolecular politics [Flower, Heath 1993: 29].

Thus, since the motives for biopolitical action have remained unchanged, the relationships that exist between it and rational choice theory will be analogous to those of modern biopolitics. The fundamental difference between the biopolitical paradigm and rational choice theory, however, has been emphasised with the transformation to postmodern biopolitics.

The issue of human autonomy occupies a central place in the polemics between techno-enthusiasts and bioconservatives. Bioconservatives recognise the serious dangers of the development of modern technologies and argue that projects such as

transhumanism or artificial intelligence may put an end to values such as equality, justice, freedom or autonomy [see: Sandel 2007; Fukuyama 2002]. In the context of the three basic premises of the theory of rational choice, the risk of a total loss of autonomy due to the actions of power causes a complete redefinition of the concept of a rational man. If humans are subject to modifications at the biotechnological and neurological level, their consciousness can be constructed in a specific, desirable way. Such people, with clearly delineated behavioural patterns and artificially created genetic material, will not create a variety of new scenarios – they will use the one that has been “forced” upon them directly by the authorities.

The second problem of the theory of rational choice in the light of postmodern biopolitics targets its very core. As mentioned earlier, a basic assumption for rational choice theorists is the claim that humans are constantly making decisions. In the context of the development of artificial intelligence, however, it should be noted that the “burden” of decision-making in many areas of socio-political life is being shifted to computers and algorithms [see: Christian, Griffiths 2016]. This means that with the development of “technocentric biopolitics”, the vision of an autonomous, sovereign human being who constantly calculates and makes decisions to achieve his goals is collapsing.

CONCLUSIONS

Both rational choice theory and biopolitics are extremely important paradigms in the social sciences – including political science. While pointing out the connections between them, it should be noted that they are not as obvious as one might think. The paper adopts the hypothesis that the assumptions of biopolitical theory falsify the basic axioms of rational choice theory. As a result of the analysis, it turned out that the relationship between both paradigms is more complicated and we cannot assume that biopolitics is the antithesis of rational choice theory or that it excludes the validity of its claims.

In the context of modern biopolitics, it is important to note that two basic assumptions of the rational choice theory are problematic: rationality and the self-interest of decision-makers. Ostensibly, the phenomena of micromanagement, anatomopolitical power over the body or even population biopolitics described by Foucault exclude the legitimacy of the claim to act in self-interest, as they significantly limit human autonomy through the “shaping of the soul”. However, assuming that conforming to the prevailing social norms and scenarios set by biopower minimises the “punishment” and maximises the individual’s gains – the assumptions of biopolitical theory do not contradict the axioms of rational choice theory. Thus, in describing the relationship between modern biopolitics and rational choice theory, it would be more relevant to say that these theories are complementary. Biopolitics answers the question that remains unanswered in rational choice theory – why people behave in certain ways.

In the case of postmodern biopolitics, these relations are essentially analogous, for the aims of postmodern biopower are the same as its modern form. The main difference, however, lies in the increased possibilities of influence through the use of biotechnology, nanotechnology or robotics. This, in turn, highlights a fundamental difference between the two paradigms – anthropological characteristics. In addition, postmodern “technocentric biopolitics” in the form of artificial intelligence undermines the basic assumption of rational choice theory – the assumption that it is the human being who makes the decisions – hence it is postmodern biopolitics that is closer to the antithesis of rational choice theory than to its classical, modern form.

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TEORIA RACJONALNEGO WYBORU W ŚWIETLE BIOPOLITYKI

Streszczenie: Zarówno teoria racjonalnego wyboru, jak i biopolityka są niezwykle istotnymi paradygmatami w naukach społecznych – w tym w politologii. Wydawać by się mogło, że ich podstawowe aksjomaty stoją ze sobą w sprzeczności, bowiem oddziaływanie mikrostruktur władzy biopolitycznej wyklucza suwerenne i autonomiczne procesy decyzyjne. W pracy przyjęto więc hipotezę uznającą, że założenia biopolityki falsyfikują podstawowe aksjomaty teorii racjonalnego wyboru, a zatem możemy uznawać ją za antytezę teorii racjonalnego wyboru. Aby zweryfikować postawioną hipotezę, zastosowano metodę analizy treści – ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem opracowań dotyczących obu paradygmatów oraz źródeł pierwotnych wspartych elementami komparatystyki. Na bazie przeprowadzonych analiz dowiedziono, że założenia obu paradygmatów nie muszą stać ze sobą w sprzeczności – mogą mieć wręcz charakter komplementarny. Działania podejmowane przez człowieka w oparciu o zasadę racjonalności oraz kierowanie się interesem własnym mogą być uzasadniane działaniami biopolityki, a zatem postawiona hipoteza została sfalsyfikowana.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria racjonalnego wyboru, biopolityka nowoczesna, metodologia, paradygmaty, biopolityka ponowoczesna

BIOGRAPHY

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