As one can see in the recently published lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault’s theory of biopolitics has undergone a number of transformations. His theory originally emerged in the analysis of ‘discipline societies’ (in Society Must Be Defended, 1976), and was substantially modified in the lectures that were supposed to develop this theory. A first shift occurred when Foucault introduced the opposition between ‘discipline societies’ and ‘security societies’: instead of being conceived of as a disciplinary technique turned upon the population, biopolitics became a technique of power defined by the regulation of its natural and artificial environment (Security, Territory and Population, 1977-1978). A second shift occurred with the project of a history of governmentality (The Birth of Biopolitics, 1978-1979): instead of being conceived of as a technique of power common to both the ‘State of police’ (“Etat de police”) and liberalism, it appeared that liberalism had to be conceived as “the general framework of biopolitics.”

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At the end of *Society Must Be Defended*, as well as in the conclusion of the first part of *The Will to Knowledge*, biopolitics is defined as a new technique of power complementing discipline. Whereas the latter is centred on the control of bodies, biopolitics designates the regulation of a new political object: the population. These two procedures belong to what Foucault calls biopower since they are both applied to human bodies; but they are not dealing with the same bodies and therefore are not taking life in charge in the same sense. Since the “anatomo-politics of individuals” is “centred on the body as a machine,” as “capacities and forces,” it is applied to an economical body rather than a biological one. By contrast, since ‘biopolitics’ is “focused on the species body, the body imbued with mechanism of life,” it takes the biological body in charge. But in biopolitics itself, the notion of ‘life’ remains ambiguous since it is not in the same sense that insurance techniques and health policies (the two aspects of biopolitics) strive to regulate populations. Since the article entitled “The Birth of Social Medicine” (1976) is the only developed account of biopolitics that Foucault ever offered, it deserves special attention in order to clarify the very notion of biopolitics. Even if this article pre-dates biopolitics (since it is written within the framework of the history of discipline and before the opposition between liberalism and the ‘State of police’), it is possible to ask how this history of social medicine fits with the definition of liberalism as ‘the general framework of biopolitics’.

This paper discusses neither the Foucauldian theory of biopower nor his theory of liberal governmentality as a whole. Instead, it focuses on the role played by the issue of public health within liberal governmentality. First, I give a presentation of what is, according to Foucault, the relationship between liberalism and medicine as a biopower. Second, in opposition to Foucault, I attempt to show that issues of social medicine cannot be reduced to issues of social control and regulation by medicalisation. Third, I suggest that, understood in a non-Foucauldian way, the idea of biopolitics could help define a principle that would guide the critique of what could be called ‘social pathologies’.

I. Biopolitics and Foucault’s Theory of Liberalism

According to Foucault, biopower and biopolitics are older than liberalism. Even if biopolitics came after anatomo-politics, social medicine was already