



**WORLD BULLETIN
PUBLISHING**

Online Publishing Hub

World Bulletin of Education and Learning (WBEL)

ISSN (E): 3072-175X

Volume 2, Issue 2, February 2026



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<https://worldbulletin.org/index.php/1>

THE MEDICALIZATION OF LIFE: FROM MICHEL FOUCAULT TO GLOBAL HEALTH GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

The article examines the historical and philosophical transformation of the concept of health through the prism of medicalization, tracing its evolution from the critical analytics of power developed by Michel Foucault to contemporary models of global health governance. The study analyzes how medicine has expanded beyond the clinical sphere to become a central mechanism for regulating social behavior, constructing norms, and shaping subjectivity in modern societies. Drawing upon Foucault's concepts of biopower, discipline, and governmentality, the paper argues that medical discourse functions not only as a therapeutic practice but also as a technology of power that organizes bodies, populations, and risk management strategies. The transition from sovereign power to biopolitical regulation is examined as a key turning point in the formation of modern public health systems. The article further explores the institutionalization of global health governance in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, focusing on the role of transnational organizations such as the World Health Organization and their normative frameworks. Particular attention is paid to the expansion of preventive paradigms, epidemiological surveillance, and the digitalization of health monitoring as instruments of global coordination and control.

Keywords: Health, harmony, healthy lifestyle, antiquity, wellness, global modernity, philosophical anthropology.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, health has become one of the central organizing principles of social life. No longer confined to the clinical domain, it structures political agendas, economic strategies, educational programs, and individual life

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projects. The contemporary emphasis on prevention, risk management, lifestyle regulation, and digital self-monitoring reflects a profound transformation: medicine has expanded from a curative practice into a comprehensive framework for governing bodies and populations. This process—commonly described as medicalization—demands philosophical clarification.

The conceptual foundations of medicalization were critically articulated in the works of Michel Foucault, whose analyses of biopower, discipline, and governmentality revealed how modern power operates through the administration of life rather than through overt coercion. In Foucault’s account, medicine functions as a strategic site where knowledge and power intersect, producing norms of normality and pathology, regulating conduct, and shaping modern subjectivity. Health thus becomes not merely a biological state but a political category embedded in institutional practices and epistemic regimes.

In recent decades, the dynamics described by Foucault have acquired a global dimension. International institutions, particularly the World Health Organization, have consolidated transnational frameworks of health governance that coordinate surveillance systems, standardize medical protocols, and promote universal models of prevention. The globalization of epidemiological monitoring, digital health technologies, and biosecurity strategies signals a new phase in the expansion of medical rationality beyond national boundaries.

This article seeks to analyze the evolution of medicalization from its theoretical articulation in Foucauldian philosophy to its institutional embodiment in contemporary global health governance. The central research problem concerns the ambivalent nature of this transformation: does the expansion of medical frameworks enhance human well-being and collective security, or does it intensify mechanisms of normalization and control? By situating current health policies within a broader genealogy of biopolitical power, the study aims to clarify the ethical and political implications of medicalization in global modernity.

Methodologically, the article employs historical-philosophical reconstruction, conceptual analysis, and elements of critical social theory. Such an approach allows for a systematic examination of how the discourse of health has evolved

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into a normative matrix that structures both individual responsibility and global regulatory systems. Historically, medicine was primarily concerned with diagnosing and treating disease. However, beginning in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it gradually expanded its jurisdiction. Public hygiene, demographic statistics, urban sanitation, and epidemiological monitoring transformed health into a matter of state concern. The body became an object of administrative knowledge.



In the twentieth century, medicalization intensified. Conditions previously considered moral, social, or personal—such as deviance, aging, childbirth, stress, and even shyness—were increasingly framed in medical terms. The authority to define “normality” shifted toward medical institutions, embedding scientific discourse within everyday life.

Thus, medicalization is not simply the growth of medicine; it is the transformation of social norms through medical rationality.

According to Michel Foucault, modern power differs from sovereign power. Instead of exercising control through punishment and prohibition, it operates by managing life. Biopower focuses on optimizing health, productivity, and longevity at the population level. It functions through statistics, surveillance, classification, and normalization.

Medicine becomes a strategic instrument of this power. Through diagnostic categories and preventive programs, it produces norms of the healthy body and responsible citizen. Individuals internalize these norms, practicing self-regulation in accordance with medical advice. Health becomes a moral imperative: to be healthy is to be disciplined, productive, and socially valuable. This shift marks the emergence of what Foucault termed governmentality—the subtle art of governing individuals through self-governance.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witnessed the globalization of health management. Epidemics, pandemics, and transnational mobility required coordinated responses beyond national borders. Institutions such as the World Health Organization established standardized protocols, monitoring systems, and preventive strategies. Global health governance integrates epidemiological data collection, risk assessment, emergency response mechanisms, and

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normative recommendations. Health is framed not only as a human right but also as a matter of global security. Biosecurity strategies illustrate how disease prevention intersects with geopolitical stability.

In this context, medicalization transcends the state and becomes a transnational regulatory framework.

The digital revolution has intensified medicalization. Wearable devices, mobile health applications, genetic testing, and algorithmic diagnostics generate continuous streams of biometric data. The body becomes a source of measurable information.

Self-tracking practices—monitoring steps, sleep cycles, heart rate, calorie intake—reflect a new form of internalized surveillance. Individuals voluntarily participate in their own medicalization, transforming health into a project of constant optimization. Risk replaces illness as the primary object of intervention. This digital biopolitics redefines autonomy. While technologies promise empowerment, they simultaneously embed individuals within data-driven governance systems.

Medicalization possesses a dual character. On the one hand, it contributes to increased life expectancy, disease prevention, and improved quality of life. Public vaccination programs, maternal care, and preventive medicine have saved millions of lives. On the other hand, the expansion of medical authority risks pathologizing normal variations of human experience. The boundary between therapy and enhancement becomes blurred. Social problems may be reframed as biological deficiencies, obscuring structural inequalities.

The ethical tension lies between care and control. When health becomes an obligatory norm, deviation may lead to stigmatization. Responsibility for well-being shifts increasingly to the individual, sometimes masking socio-economic determinants of health. In global modernity, the human being is increasingly conceptualized as a biological project requiring constant maintenance and optimization. The healthy lifestyle becomes not only a recommendation but a moral standard and a marker of social capital.

Health intersects with productivity, competitiveness, and economic performance. The wellness industry commodifies well-being, transforming it

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into a marketable good. Thus, medicalization reshapes the anthropological understanding of the self—from a moral or spiritual subject to a bio-psycho-social system under continuous regulation.

The evolution of medicalization—from its critical analysis in the philosophy of Michel Foucault to its institutional realization in global health governance—reveals a fundamental transformation in the organization of modern societies. Health has become a central axis around which political power, ethical norms, and economic structures are organized.

Medicalization in global modernity represents a complex dialectic. It enhances human survival and collective security while simultaneously expanding mechanisms of normalization and surveillance. The challenge for contemporary social philosophy lies in articulating a model of health governance that preserves human dignity, autonomy, and social justice without denying the undeniable benefits of medical progress. Ultimately, health today is not merely a state of the body—it is a form of governance, a moral narrative, and a defining feature of global civilization.

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