Making Live and Letting Die in COVID-19: A Biopolitical Review

Abstract

This article applies discussions of biopolitics and rationalities by governments to *make live and let die* as a heuristic for the speculative sorting of bodies and their antibodies as state governments lurch toward reopening. It considers how governments rationalize the elimination of certain populations in the name of improving the vitality of the dominant group. Sociologist Michel Foucault, who popularized the idea among academics in the late 1970s, called biopolitics the application of “life-producing techniques” by the state. Biopolitics operates under the prerogative of whom to *make live* and whom to *let die – from*  the overt extermination of subgroups to improve the vitality of the population to reopening economies despite the known risk to Latinx and African Americans with higher preexisting conditions. Letting die also applies to corporeal spaces as incarcerated populations — including those seeking asylum who have not committed crimes — where virus spread is unchecked. These are places reminiscent of Agamben’s *camps* where individuals are stripped from their political lives and left bare without statehood protections. This article takes Foucault’s conception of statistical and demographic technologies of biopolitics and places them firmly within the physical boundaries and rationalities of the nation-state.

Discussion

From immunity certificates to antibody blood tests to surveillance apps –being able to verify immunity, the argument goes, could allow some people to safely return to work, eat at restaurants and participate in activities otherwise prohibited by social distancing restrictions. Other types of categorization may follow based on age or place of residence. As we embark on a speculative sorting of bodies and their antibodies, this is an opportune time to revisit discussions on biopolitics and rationalities by governments for the treatment of certain people for the survival of the whole. Sociologist Michel Foucault, who popularized the idea among academics in the late 1970s, called biopolitics the application of “life-producing techniques” by the state (Campbell 2013, 9). Michel Foucault, who popularized the idea among academics in the late 1970s, called biopolitics the application of “life-producing techniques” by the state (Campbell 2013, 9).

It generally refers to specific knowledge of the population provided by disciplines of statistics, demography, epidemiology, and biology. These disciplines produce knowledge about the “processes of life” to govern individuals and groups by practices of “exclusion, normalization, disciplining, therapeutics, and optimization” (Lemke 2011, 5). The concept of biopolitics is believed to have been coined at the beginning of the 20th century by Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén and has been embraced in various fanatical, fascist and other regimes throughout the 20th century (Lemke 2011, 10).

The state strengthens its position of *making live* through forecasts and statistics to lower mortality rates, increase life expectancy, stimulate birth rates, and in effect, establish a norm that optimizes a state of life. As a program, It is concerned with regularizing the state of *making live* in order to navigate catastrophic, yet perennial events, such as scourges and pandemics (Foucault 2003, 247). It has been taken up as a kind of governmentality that applies metrics of public health and other statistics on the level of the population to replace traditional sovereignty of the kings right to kill. But “Making live” can also rationalize killing subgroups to improve the vitality of the population. It came into full fruition under Nazi Germany, which rationalized genocide, and it is often accompanied by nationalism and xenophobia (Savage 2007; Lemke 2011; Fouault 2003). So the function of “making live” is inextricably tied to “letting die.” Together, they rationalize the culling away of unwanted portions of the population, in order to strengthen the dominant group. During the COVID-19 crisis “making live and letting die” has led to reopening of states economies despite known risks to Latinx and African Americans with higher preexisting conditions and public facing jobs, locking down immigration detention centers exposing those seeking asylum who have not committed crimes, the southern border and incarcerated populations who exist in places reminiscent of Agamben’s *camps* where individuals are stripped from their political lives and left bare without statehood protections (Coleman and Grove 2009).

Foucault argued that biopolitical technology found its pure expression of power through medicine – which he called a power/knowledge that can be applied to both the body and the population, and therefore “will therefore have both disciplinary effects and regulatory effects” (Foucault 2003, 252).

Freewill

Instead of the sovereign’s heavy-handed right to kill, biopolitics manages the population through the production of desire, according to Foucault, which goes to the heart of his central character of liberalism: *Homo Oeconomicus* (Brown 2015, 57). The individual, through government technologies, is enticed to make live. But the question becomes what to live for? If not for the sake of life itself, then for the market. “In Foucault’s telling, liberalism was born with a market governmentality rather than the rights of man at its heart,” writes Wendy Brown. “Without touching the subject, liberalism governmentality rises with the emergence of biopolitics” (Brown 2015, 58). The political economy becomes the new reason of state and establishes how not to govern too much. The state produces *desire* to entice sovereign, free-thinking individuals to act in the public’s best interest. The individual’s role in the state is imparted through “free will” or consumer choice. So the modern capitalist state and modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence (Schlosser 2008), which Foucault said was indispensable to the development of capitalism. (Foucault 1990, 141).

If disciplinary power stunts individual agency, bio-political power and governmentality operate through the agency of individuals. How do these free citizens reconcile enjoying human capital and self-preservation? In some instances, they are left with few choices. States moving to reopen businesses prior to that will strip away unemployment benefits for employees afraid to return to work and risk exposure. One particularly blunt example is the state of Iowa, where Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds is allowing businesses in a majority of counties to reopen, despite the state's still-climbing daily confirmed cases. According to the Iowa Workforce Development, which overseas unemployment benefits, Iowans on temporary layoff from COVID-19, who refuse to return to work if they are recalled by their employers will lose unemployment benefits. A refusal will be considered a "voluntary quit." The agency also warned of "serious consequences" for unemployment fraud (Reynolds 2020). While workers are not literally being whipped into working by a sovereign king, the population has little choice but to risk exposure, sickness and death in order to “make live.” Pres. Trump’s authorization of the War Powers Act on April 28 to keep 14 U.S. slaughterhouses open, where more than 30 workers had died and 10,000 workers had been infected or self-quarantined (White 2020), forces vulnerable workers into a similar quandary. If they refuse to work, they will not qualify for unemployment. So they must work at the risk of infection or be forced into a labor market with record unemployment. Populations within juridical territories are managed within this field of power.

Biopolitical Geographies

Many scholars assert that while Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power was a spatial phenomenon, his later formulation of biopolitics allowed for a withdrawal of territorial and disciplinary interventions to enable a lighter touch on governance. But Thomas Lemke argues that sovereign, territorial power is critical for biopolitics is critical for biopolitics if for no other reason than “many of our imaginative possibilities are structured around it” (Lemke 2011, 13). The advent of the modern nation-state, argues Rowan Savage, shifted perceptions about people as culturally distinct to the territory they inhabited. “A conflict arose between “demos and ethnos,” he says. “The nation was, to use Benedict Anderson’s concept, an “imagined community” – but who were the citizens imagined as national subjects?” (Savage 2007, 408) Consider two existing models – the civic model based on the ideals of the French Revolution and an ethnic model of citizenship that requires membership in the majority group of the nation, whichever the majority defines it as. It is here that nation-state resurrected the metaphor of the bounded “body politic” in relation to a unitary polis in “a world of oppositional Others.” (Savage 2007, 409).

The current impact of COVID-19 and efforts by nation states to contain its spread while also reopening their economies presents a quandary of spatial management. In a federalized system like the United States, the uneven application of state policies but free movement of individuals will ensure a recirculating virus vector. Currently, there is no assurance of immunity for any known length of time from prior infection. Restrictions on travel and immigration have hardened national boundaries — which can easily play into white supremist tropes that tie the nation’s land to certain qualified people to the exclusion of those who do not belong (Gardiner 2020). In a Pre-COVID essay Beth Gardiner, writes that immigrants are often framed as invasive species — analogous to foreign plants or animals that spread unchecked into new ecosystems. While Gardiner organized her essay about the implications of white supremacy on climate change, the COVID-19 crisis is a more urgent catalyst to harden these lines of attack, generated by the White House itself. Pres. Trump’s decision to close the border to immigration under the auspices of Coronavirus protection while castigating the virus as a foreign invader from China —echoes racial schemes noted by Gardinar to protect the homeland against foreigners. She writes: “The Nazis embraced notions of a symbiotic connection between the German homeland and its people.” Indeed, the NY Times reported that Trump’s immigration adviser, Stephen Miller, has for three years been hunting for disease outbreaks in immigrant detention camps to justify shutting down all immigration through an obscure U.S. legal code of health powers (Dickerson 2020).

On top of these Xenophobic impulses – we now add plaque, which historically leads to the demonization of outsiders, says Turkish author Orhan Pamuk, who is researching a book on the 1901 Bubonic Plagues. “The most common rumors during outbreaks of plague were about who had brought the disease in and where it had come from,” writes Pamuk. “Like evil itself, plague was always portrayed as something that had come from outside” (Pamuk 2020). I believe this explains while on one hand President Trump fomented protests against stay-at-home orders in states led by Democratic governors because of economic fallout — while also further restricting immigration because of the COVID-19 (Jarvie 2020). These two actions appear contradictory — based on two different threat assessments. The threat is real enough to shut down the border, but not enough to keep the economy closed. But they fall under the single logic of resistance to foreign invaders. In this schema, COVID-19, which Trump likes to call the Chinese virus, is the product of a foreign adversary – which is reflected in organized protests that frame it as an invader that threatens the United States economy. “It had struck elsewhere before, and not enough had been done to contain it,” writes Pamuk. The virus is the product of a foreign adversary.

Another trope is to frame the virus as a hoax, but ethnographer Diana Daly an Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona iSchool noted that attendees at the reopen protests she observed, seemed to take social distancing into account and acknowledged the severity of the virus. Their anger, she said largely had to do with group affiliation. Ideas of tyranny had to do with who was making policy. Even the classicist liberal philosophers like John Locke and John Stuart Mill, who believed that men were entitled to a certain area of personal freedom as a matter of natural law, were prepared to curtail degrees of freedom to protect other values such as justice, security and equality. Jamelle Bouie argues that the notion of freedom – as it’s been evoked by protestors to resist safety measures emanates from a sense of entitled freedom in the context of whiteness. To be white is to be the quintessential autonomous subject who has control over oneself and one’s labor. “Freedom from domination and control is one aspect of the meaning of whiteness,” he writes. “The other aspect, in a kind of ideological inversion is the right to control the presence and lives of nonwhites.” Whiteness in antebellum America was the right to discipline and punish those of violated the racial order. “If Whiteness has meant the right to control and to be free from control, then it is easy to see how racial identity might influence the reaction to the lockdowns among a certain subset of white Americans” (Bouie 2020). Georgia’s Gov. Brian Kemp’s early call for easing social mandates while cases of COVID-19 continued to escalate was described by Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, an African American, as living in the “Twilight Zone” (CNN 2020).

Writes Daly, “One clearly visible theme in the #Reopen protests is how white the attendees are…” She also noted that protestors expressed little deference towards segments of the population more vulnerable to the virus. “Their compassion also seemed limited to fellow white people” (Daly 2020).

Racism as a Technology of Making Live

Foucault argued that in order to make live on the level of the population, states must rely on a mechanism to differentiate segments of the population — which he called racism (Fouault 2003). “Foucault’s working thesis is that the transformation of sovereign power into biopower leads to a shift from a political- military discourse into a racist-biological one” (Lemke 2011, 40). Race and Racism functions as a central technology to biopolitics. Just as medicine is the intersecting locus of both public health and disciplinary effects on the body — race becomes the intersecting rationale for sorting out disqualified groups from a healthy body politic. In Foucault’s mythology, racism allows the taking of life through bio-power which is otherwise primarily concerned with making live. “Racism fulfills two important functions within an economy of biopower. First, it creates fissures in the social domain that allow for the division of what is imagined in principle to be a homogeneous biological whole…. In this manner, a differentiation into good and bad, higher and lower, ascending or descending “races” is made possible and a dividing line established “between what must live and what must die” (Lemke 2011, 41).

The power to kill is then justified through the mechanisms of making live. It becomes the power to kill some on behalf of the greater population. The function of racism by the state is to cull away the diseased population in order that the rest may flourish.

“Racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other — in a biological type relationship”(Lemke 2011, 41). As inferiors die out, the stronger the species will be. In a normalizing society, racism is a precondition that makes killing acceptable. So, it must be in the service of society. “There were two central features of the National Socialist conception of state and society,” says Lemke. “First, it promoted the idea that the subjects of history were not individuals, groups, or classes but self-enclosed communities with a common genetic heritage” (Lemke 2011, 11). This idea was complemented by the assumption of a natural hierarchy of peoples and races according to their different “inherited biological quality.” This allowed it to seem not only justified but also necessary to treat people unequally. Second, National Socialist ideology rested on the belief that social relations and political problems could ultimately be attributed to biological causes (Lemke 2011, 11).

A tendency to blame segments of the U.S. population for their poverty and health as opposed to the structural and historic conditions produced by the political economy can easily slip into a rationality for letting die to enhance what the Nazi’s called a Lebensraum -- or a ‘‘living space,’’ which is a concrete space where the occupation, partition, and distribution of land is grounded in the duty to care for, and enable the multiplication of, a specific population (Sitze 2012). The Nazi worldview feared tiny, powerful agents corroding the German body, which catalyzed “a vast hygienic experiment” to usher a utopia scrubbed of all diseases -- from cancer and mental illness to alien racial elements, writes savage (2007, 409). The nation-state here is threatened by the “internal presence of the extraneous” and vulnerable by the mere presence of those who sap the strength of the body politic. By removing Jews, Roma and other groups seen as intellectually inferior by race and birth, the Nazi Regime sought to improve the health of its Aryan Nation. It was the most “murderous” and “suicidal” biopolitical movement of modern history (Foucault 2003, 259). “From this point onward, war is about two things. It is not simply a matter of destroying a political adversary, but of destroying an enemy race” and biological threat that the Other represents to our race (Foucault 2003, 257). This is the only way possible “to both protect life and authorize a holocaust,” writes Agamben (Agamben 2013, 167). When it comes to imagining the inhumanity of foreign peoples, their mere existence can be seen as a mortal threat to one’s “imaginary sovereignty” says Achilles Mbembe. Racism is an expression of a schism within society that is provoked by the biopolitical idea of an ongoing and always incomplete cleansing of the social body.” Racism here is not defined by individual action. “Rather, it structures social fields of action, guides political practices, and is realized through state apparatuses” (Lemke 2011, 44)

In translating the social conflicts of the industrial world in racial terms we end up comparing the working classes and “stateless people” today to the “savages” of the colonial world”(Mbembe 2013, 167), which leads to spaces of exception where nationalist outgroups are stripped of their political lives. This is the disciplinary component to “letting die” where stateless actors are thrown away — in prisons, immigrant asylum detention centers and other spaces of control, where COVID-19 infection has accelerated. Agamben

saw this clearly, when “stateless” actors were imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay at the occupied territory of a foreign country. Here, “bare life” proves to be the solid basis of a political body. “Bare life” as existing, for example, in asylum seekers, refugees, and the brain dead have one thing in common: although they all involve human life, they are excluded from the protection of the law. They remain either turned over to humanitarian assistance and unable to assert a legal claim, or they are reduced to the status of “biomass” through the authority of scientific interpretations and definitions (Lemke 2011, 55)

Agamben’s reconstruction of the interrelationships between sovereign rule and biopolitical exception results in an unsettling outcome. The thesis of the concentration camp as “the hidden matrix of the politics in which we still live” (Agamben 2000, 44) makes claims for an inner link between the emergence of human rights and the development of concentration camps. Evidently, the camp for him symbolizes and fixes the border between “bare life” and political existence. The camps in this sense are not only Nazi concentration camps or contemporary deportation centers, but rather any space in which “bare life” is systematically produced: “the camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule” (Agamben 2013, 168-169). Here, COVD-19 does the state’s murderous work as it travels silently and undetected pruning unwanted groups on behalf of the state that affirms its actions by neglect and willful inaction.

Its victims in these enclosed spaces comprise people of color – whose fate is often determined by a lack access to financial resources, legal representation and racial profiling by arresting officers. Instead of exercising a power to kill, the state exercises its sovereignty to kill on its power to decide on the state of exception (Agamben 2013, 171). And its inaction is allowing the power to let die by a mode of default. If not of the immediate virus then by the continuous neglect that ensures their potential exposure other epidemiological events. This continuous, scientific biopower not only makes live but also hides death. Hiding death is easier in corporeal spaces as well as during a disease pandemic where the victims and memorialization occur in private or sealed ICU units. There are few live funerals or evidence of death except for the presence of refrigerated trucks. Death is disassociated, instrumentalized and silent.

Conclusion

So here we are. State economies lurch toward reopening prolonging COVID-19 infection. Pres. Trump embarks on two-prong biopolitical strategy to protect the Lebensraum-homeland from foreign carriers of plague and purge segments of the U.S. population that are more susceptible to disease – which fractures along race. Incarcerated subjects remain in a state of exception locked down and exposed to virus spread. Stay at Home orders lift as liberal self-interested subject falls pray to the biopolitical willingness to sacrifice others for their own freewill of consumer choice that is also required to sustain the modern capitalist state that co-determines their subjectivity.

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