

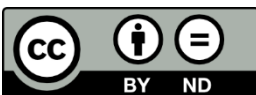
Biopolitics in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Biopower is a term coined by Michel Foucault, referring to the practice of modern nation-states by "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations". (Foucault 1990, 140) Foucault used the term to refer specifically to public health practices, among other regulatory mechanisms. Biopower control people in large groups, through an *anatomo-politics of the human body*, and *biopolitics of the population* through social institutions of discipline. Power is codified in both social practices and human behavior, as the human subject gradually accepts subtle regulations and expectations of the social order. (Policante 2010)

" By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower." (Foucault et al. 2009, 1)

A specific way of applying biopower is what Foucault calls "*massifying*", (Foucault et al. 2009, 55–86) which uses scientific apparatus and equipment. This anatomo-politics of the human body correlates with the new knowledge of science and technology under the guise of a liberal democracy, where life itself becomes a deliberate political strategy and an economic, political and scientific problem, to which the nation state is coupled.

Foucault argues that while the stated purpose of biopower is to maximize life, it also has a dark side: when the stakes are life itself, anything can be justified by the state, thus being able to easily eliminate groups identified as threatening the life of the nation, or of humanity. (Foucault 1990, 137)

Foucault draws attention to what he calls the major political and social project, namely the "*milieu intérieur*" (inner environment), as a support for the truths uttered by the authorities. In the

modern version, the government is thus presented to the population in the media as a means of efficiency, fiscal optimization, political responsibility and rigor, forming a public discourse of government solidarity and social consensus. (Foucault et al. 2009, 283)

Biopolitics is a concept that takes into account the management of the life and populations of a governed region. According to Foucault, biopolitics is "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order." (Foucault 1990) So, the poststructuralist meaning given by Foucault to the term denotes social and political power over life.

Foucault speaks of a style of government that regulates populations through "biopower" in all aspects of human life. (Foucault et al. 2009, 1) Agni Vlavianos Arvanitis (Pellam 2015, 43) considers biopolitics as a conceptual and operational framework for the development of society, promoting bios as a central theme in all forms of life. (Tolba 2001, 1027)

Biopolitics produces a generalized disciplinary society (Foucault et al. 2009, 377–78) and regulatory controls through biopolitics of the population. (Foucault et al. 2009, 378,397) Foucault states that the humanities, especially the medical sciences, have led at the emergence of the anatomic-politics of the human body, a biopolitics and bio-history of man.

Foucault's biopolitics refers to the intersection between power (political, economic, judicial, etc.) and the bodily autonomy of the individual. (Schirato, Danaher, and Webb 2012, 90) In the study of colonialism, biopolitics is the means by which a colonizing force uses political power to regulate and control the colonized population. (Said 1979, 113) Mercantilism has often allowed for a biopolitical approach to hunger, with multiple historical examples.

Foucault's concept of *biopolitics* is derived from his own concept of *biopower* and the extension of state power over the physical and political bodies of a population. (Lemke, Casper,

and Moore 2011) Biopolitics acts as a control apparatus exercised over an entire population. (Foucault 2003, 242)

Giorgio Agamben is a well-known Italian philosopher who investigates the concepts of the state of emergency, the way of life (borrowed from Ludwig Wittgenstein) and the *homo sacer*. The concept of biopolitics (starting from the work of Michel Foucault) is found in many of his writings.

Agamben says that what is manifesting in this pandemic is the growing tendency to use the state of emergency as a normal paradigm of government, through a militarization of those areas where there are people proven to be infected. Such a formula will allow the government to quickly extend the state of emergency to all regions. He lists a number of serious restrictions on freedom imposed by pandemic restrictions. These restrictions would be disproportionate to the real threat. Once terrorism is exhausted as a justification for exceptional measures, "epidemics could provide the ideal pretext for expanding these measures, beyond any limitation." (Agamben 2020c) Thus, "in a vicious circle, the restriction of freedom imposed by governments is accepted in the name of a desire for security, which was created by the same governments that now intervene to satisfy it." (Agamben 2020)

Agamben notes that

"Faced with the frantic, irrational and completely unfounded emergency measures adopted against an alleged epidemic ... why the media and the authorities are doing everything possible to spread a state of panic, thus causing a genuine state of emergency, with serious limitations to move and suspend daily life in entire regions?" (Agamben 2020c)

Later, Agamben returns with some clarifications (Kotsko 2020a) introducing the concept of "*naked life*": "The first thing that the panic wave, which paralyzed the country, clearly showed, is that our society believes in nothing but naked life." People

"... are prepared to sacrifice practically everything – normal living conditions, social relations, work, even friendships and religious or political beliefs – to avoid the danger of falling ill. The naked life, and the fear of losing it, is not something that brings men and women together, but something that blinds and separates them. Other human beings, like those in

the plague described by Manzoni, are now seen only as potential contaminators to be avoided at all costs or at least to keep at a distance of at least one metre. The dead – our dead – have no right to a funeral and it's not clear what happens to the corpses of our loved ones. Our fellow humans have been erased and it's odd that the Churches remain silent on this point. What will human relations become in a country that will be accustomed to living in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society with no other value other than survival?"

"Men have become so used to living in conditions of permanent crisis and emergency that they don't seem to notice that their lives have been reduced to a purely biological condition, one that has lost not only any social and political dimension, but even any compassionate and emotional one. A society that lives in a permanent state of emergency cannot be a free one. We effectively live in a society that has sacrificed freedom to so-called "security reasons" and as a consequence has condemned itself to living in a permanent state of fear and insecurity." (Kotsko 2020)

According to Agamben, we've come to talk about the virus in terms of war. A war against an invisible enemy. "The enemy isn't somewhere outside, it's inside us." (Kotsko 2020)

In *A Question*, Giorgio Agamben returns with an approach to "social distancing" as the new principle of organizing society, decreeing that "a norm that affirms that we must renounce the good to save the good is just as false and contradictory as that which, to protect freedom, orders us to renounce freedom." (Kotsko 2020b)

In *New Reflections*, Agamben, states that, with this forced isolation, we live a new totalitarianism. It is always dangerous to entrust doctors and scientists with decisions that are ultimately ethical and political. (Dean 2020)

In *Medicine as Religion*, Giorgio Agamben: states (Agamben 2020b) that in the modern West coexist three major belief systems: Christianity, capitalism and science, which sometimes intersect. The novelty consists in the fact that between science and the other two faiths, without noticing, an underground and relentless conflict was triggered, with successful results for science. In science, medicine occupies a special place, being characterized by

- does not need a special dogma, but is limited to borrowing its fundamental concepts from biology - there is a god or evil principle, namely disease, whose specific agents are bacteria

and viruses, and a beneficent god or principle that is not health, but recovery, whose cultic agents are drugs and therapies

- the phenomenon has become permanent and ubiquitous - it is no longer about taking medication, doctor visits or surgery: all our lives we must worship this cult moment by moment, because the enemy, the virus, is always present and must be fought constantly
- the practice of worship is no longer free and voluntary - it becomes mandatory from a normative point of view
- the medical religion has unreservedly taken over the eschatological urgency from Christianity - the medical religion combines the perpetual crisis of capitalism with the Christian idea of an end time
- like capitalism and unlike Christianity, the medical religion does not offer the prospect of salvation and redemption - recovery is only temporary, as the evil God, the virus, cannot be eliminated once and for all.

"Philosophers must again come into conflict with religion, which is no longer Christianity, but science, or that part of it which has taken the form of a religion." (Agamben 2020b)

Patrick Zylberman described, in 2013, the process by which health security becomes an essential part of state and international policy strategies, (Flahault et al. 2016) (Lewis 2020) by creating a kind of "health terror" as a tool for governance. Zylberman points out that the apparatus used by the WHO was articulated in three points: 1) the construction, on the basis of a possible risk, of a fictitious scenario allowing the government of an extreme situation; 2) adopting the logic of the worst case scenario as a regime of political rationality; 3) the organization of all citizens in a way that strengthens government institutions, through which the imposed obligations are presented as evidence of altruism and the citizen no longer has the right to health but is legally obliged to be healthy (*biosecurity*).

Agamben considers, in *Biosicurezza*, (Agamben 2020a) that the emergency situation can allow the design of a governance paradigm whose effectiveness will go beyond any normal form of governance. Thus, biosecurity has already proved capable of causing the absolute cessation of all political activities and all social relations as the maximum form of civic participation.

"In question is a whole conception of the destinies of human society from a perspective that, in many respects, seems to have adopted the apocalyptic idea of the end of the world from the religions that are now at their west. After replacing politics with the economy, now, in order to ensure governance, even this must be integrated with the new paradigm of biosecurity, in front of which we will have to sacrifice all other requirements. It is legitimate to ask whether such a society can still be defined as human or whether the loss of sensitive relationships, face, friendship, love, can really be compensated by an abstract and supposedly completely fictitious health security." (Agamben 2020a)

Jean-Luc Nancy, in *Excepción viral*, (Nancy 2020) states that Agamben fails to observe that exception really becomes the rule in a world where technical interconnections reach a hitherto unknown intensity.

Many critics of Agamben consider his statements to be paranoid and exaggerated. (Peters 2020) Thus, J. L. Nancy responds by emphasizing:

"We must be careful not to reach the wrong target: an entire civilization is in question, there is no doubt about it. There is a kind of viral exception - biological, computer, cultural - that is pandemic. Governments are nothing more than gloomy executors, and questioning them seems like a diversionary ploy rather than a political reflection." (Nancy 2020)

Regarding Agamben's statements, Slavoj Žižek wonders (Žižek 2020) why would the state power be interested in promoting such a panic, which generates distrust of state power and disrupts the economy? Measures in the event of an epidemic should not be automatically reduced to the usual paradigm of surveillance and control propagated by thinkers such as Foucault. The problem is that these measures may not be effective, and the inefficiency may be hidden by the authorities that will manipulate and hide the real data.

Roberto Esposito, in *Curati a oltranza*, discusses Nancy's strong opposition to the paradigm of biopolitics, but there is no denying the constant development of biopolitics. (Esposito

2020) The state of emergency pushes the policy towards "exceptional procedures that may, in the long run, undermine the balance of power in favor of the executive branch". But he believes the risks to democracy are an exaggeration. Politics and medicine have been interconnected for at least three centuries, which has led to a process of medicalization of politics and a politicization of medicine.

John Cassidy (Cassidy 2020) states that it is too early to reject Agamben's theory because it may prove correct especially as the time of the US elections approaches: it is possible that Trump will use the "state of emergency" to take exceptional governmental powers to declare a postponement for a year or two." (Peters 2020)

Shaj Mohan, in *What Carries Us On*, (Mohan 2020) talks about Gandhi's principles of hypophysics, according to which nature is good, following Kant's taxonomy of moral thinking. (Mohan, Dwivedi, and Nancy 2018) Following an analogy-based reasoning, he concludes that the theory of "biopolitics" is itself a kind of hypophysics, the other part of hypophysics being the technological determinism. In contrast, biopolitics and other theories make us immobile and resigned like animals caught in headlights.

Panagiotis Sotiris considers that notions such as "biopolitics", "naked life," or "state of emergency", developed by Giorgio Agamben and debated by many philosophers, are a clear example of failure to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. (Sotiris 2020) It proposes a rethinking of biopolitics, as formulated by Michel Foucault, (Foucault 1990, 139–40) proposing a democratic biopolitics, "also be based on the democratization of knowledge. The increased access to knowledge, along with the need for popularization campaigns makes possible collective decision processes that are based on knowledge and understanding and not just the authority of experts." (Sotiris 2020)

Daniele Lorenzini, in *Biopolitics in the Time of Coronavirus*, proposes a completely different understanding of biopolitics from Michel Foucault's notion. (Lorenzini 2020) Inventing the notion of biopolitics, Foucault wanted first of all to make us aware of the historical passage of a threshold, of what he calls the "threshold of biological modernity" of a society. (Foucault 1990, 143) Thus, " Our society crossed such a threshold when the biological processes characterizing the life of human beings as a species became a crucial issue for political decisionmaking," at the same time remaining faithful to Foucault's idea that power is not good or bad in itself, but that it is always dangerous.

According to Lorenzini, biopolitics is always a policy of differential vulnerability, which "structurally relies on the establishment of hierarchies in the value of lives, producing and multiplying vulnerability as a means of governing people." (Lorenzini 2020) In this regard, Lorenzini states that the "medical heroes" and "care workers" who "fight the coronavirus" certainly deserve our appreciation, but are they really the only ones who "taking care" of us? After all, don't all workers deserve - and not exclusively in these "exceptional" circumstances - to be considered "heroes"? The virus blatantly reveals that "our society structurally relies on the incessant production of differential vulnerability and social inequalities."

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