

The Coronavirus: Biopolitics and the Rise of ‘Anthropocene Authoritarianism’

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With politics suspended, societies under lockdown, parliaments closed and states of emergency in force globally (Runciman, 2020), many commentators have turned to Foucauldian-inspired understandings of biopolitics and population control to analyze contemporary events (Horvat, 2020; Agamben, 2020a; Demetri, 2020; Singh, 2020; Sotiris, 2020). Biopolitics has become a key concept in critical discourses of security governance in the last two decades (Rose, 2007; Esposito, 2008; Dillon, 2015). Deriving from the work of Foucault, at the heart of biopolitical thought is the relationship of politics to life as both the basis of governance and as an object to be secured (Foucault, 2007; 2008). For Foucault, ‘life’ was a way of articulating an ‘outside’ to the human world of politics, an outside that appeared natural but was, in fact, a malleable construct (Lemke, 2011).

In these ‘top-down’ securitizing discourses, ‘life’ is constructed negatively, lacking in power and agency, as ‘bare life’—either excluded from the political realm or included as an object of the civilizing mission—legitimizing hierarchical or coercive forms of power (Agamben, 1998; Mbembe, 2019). This short piece argues that the global response to the coronavirus indicates that the biopolitical critique of governance as the



control and manipulation of life, as an object of power fails to fit today's crisis situation. The quarantining of the UK prime minister and key state officials provides a high-profile illustration of the fact that life no longer operates to easily or clearly demarcate an outside to governance. Viewed from a broader historical and political perspective, it will be argued here that the divide between governance as human 'artifice' and life as a 'natural' object of governance can no longer be sustained in the contemporary moment of the Anthropocene (Chandler, 2018). If it is the case that contemporary security discourses reflect the difficulty of maintaining the human/nature divide, so central to biopolitical imaginaries, then the rise of new forms of Anthropocene authoritarianism requires going beyond biopolitical understandings.

STATES OF EMERGENCY

In global responses to the coronavirus, "keeping calm and carrying on" is not an option. Acting normally, not panicking, not overreacting, is seen as dangerous and hubristic (Taleb et al, 2020). In order to "flatten the curve" (Wiles and Morris, 2020) it is better to close, to cancel, to restrict now, rather than to regret later. Extreme measures and state of emergency powers are being rolled out across the board (Mudde, 2020). It appears that liberal rights and freedoms are a threat to public security. The public are, in fact, the problem: they panic buy, depriving the vulnerable of essentials from toiletries to food and medicine; they socialize; they party; they travel; they put others and themselves at risk. People are the vector for the spread of the virus when left to their own devices. The policy responses, which go well beyond the provision of emergency medical assistance, suggest

that people are understood as both dangerously irrational and as weak, vulnerable and in need of protection, both from others and from themselves. Thus governments across the world have been forced to seize the levers of power in order to lead the “war” on the coronavirus (Enloe, 2020), seeking to reinvigorate central authority and to nationalize and unite societies in the collective struggle for security.

Quite rightly, some commentators have stressed the authoritarian outcomes of seeing people as needing protection, both from the virus and from themselves (Agamben, 2020a; Bargués, 2020; Furedi, 2020). The state of emergency is well described by Bruno Latour: It is the state of what is rightly called *statistics*: population management on a territorial grid seen from above and led by the power of experts. This is exactly what we see resurrected today—with the only difference that it is replicated from one nation to the next, to the point of having become worldwide. The originality of the present situation, it seems to me, is that by remaining trapped at home while outside there is only the extension of police powers and the din of ambulances, we are collectively playing a caricatured form of the figure of *biopolitics* that seems to have come straight out of a Michel Foucault lecture. (Latour, 2020)

Latour is right to note that this is no more than a “caricature” of biopolitical securitization. Better still, would be Baudrillard’s notion of ‘simulation’ (1983) as something seems awry with easy comparisons with authoritarian regimes of the past. Whilst Agamben complains that society has been reduced to the protection and promotion of ‘bare life,’ i.e. the prioritization of mere existence, this is hardly a product of authoritarian desire on behalf of governments, which have, in general, been unprepared and slow to react, often responding to media pressure for further restrictions rather than leading and initiating. It is a peculiar state of emergency that leaves government leaders accused of “nonchalance” and “complacency” (Stewart et al, 2020). This “simulation” or “caricature” of biopolitics indicates that there is something problematic with the biopolitical critique of governance as a war of exclusion and exception. Many radical and critical commentators have called for the extension of regulatory governance and asserted the potentially positive outcomes of a greater level of state intervention (Sotiris, 2020; Harari, 2020). In fact, it is the consensus—that

the virus ethically calls for the collapse of normal political and social life—that is the most striking aspect of the current crisis (Kothari et al, 2020).

A new ethical 'politics of withdrawal' (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2020; Pospisil, 2020; Bargués, 2020) from life (social, political and economic) inverses the biopolitical understanding of 'bare life' as one that is forcibly excluded from or subordinated to the polis. Instead it is 'bare life' which is put at the center of ethical commitments and formal politics that is problematized or excluded and slow to catch up. This authoritarian outlook is very different from models of the past and is better understood as 'Anthropocene authoritarianism.' At the heart of this shift to a new authoritarianism is the crisis of the modernist divide between the human sphere of politics, law and rights and the sphere of 'life' conceived as a separate or 'natural' outside. For many, Agamben's divide (1998) between 'zoé' (specifically human life) and 'bios' (biological life in general) is a problematic and outdated conception of human exceptionalism: of humans as somehow being above or superior to the rest of nature. Agamben, in fact, gets to the nub of the matter when he writes that a war on the coronavirus is "a war with an invisible enemy that can lurk in every other person... [that] is the most absurd of wars. It is, in reality, a civil war. The enemy is not outside, it is within us" (Agamben, 2020b). If we are the enemy, then the politics of coronavirus will inevitably have authoritarian implications, regardless of the formal political leanings of respective governments.

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The coronavirus brings to the surface the limits of traditional discourses of biopolitics in the face of Anthropocene authoritarianism. If we are the security threat as well as the subjects to be secured, then the separations of biopolitics can no longer hold. Extinction Rebellion (2020) activists who proclaim that "Corona is the cure. Humans are the disease" express the crisis of modernist security distinctions, perhaps in an extreme way, but are not out of line with the UN's environment chief, Inger Andersen, who argues that the virus is a message from nature that humanity is bringing these crises upon itself (Carrington, 2020). Representative of critical academic advocacy for Anthropocene authoritarianism, Latour argues: In the health crisis, it may be true that humans as a whole are "fighting" against viruses—even

if they have no interest in us and go their way from throat to throat killing us without meaning to. The situation is tragically reversed in ecological change: this time, the pathogen whose terrible virulence has changed the living conditions of all the inhabitants of the planet is not the virus at all, it is humanity! (Latour, 2020)

It would appear that the modern world which enabled the cuts and distinctions of biopolitics, the boundary—always to be negotiated in different ways—between life and politics, can no longer rationalize or legitimate power. If the lesson of the global response to the coronavirus is that humanity itself is the problem, then Anthropocene authoritarianism looks set to pose a larger long-term challenge to our ways of life than the virus itself.

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