

The concept of biopolitics is used extensively to make sense of the coronavirus pandemic because the management of the pandemic tells us much about how the biopolitics of governing in contemporary neoliberal societies works.¹ For Foucault (1978, 142–3), biopolitics is the study of how the “biological” is captured by the “political” when life passes into “knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention.” Accounts of biopolitics, a politics over life, help us understand the differential relations between “making life live” and “letting it die.” This life-and-death relation is made possible by a vast establishment comprised of laws, policies, sets of rules, techniques and procedures, public-health mechanisms, technologies, and bureaucracies that render certain lives more disposable and sacrificable than others.

Within this nexus, biopolitics is always already an economy of differential vulnerability, and ultimately a sacrificial economy: some must die in order for some to live (Lorenzini 2020). In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, moreover, the hierarchies of race and class inequality have been demonstrated in remarkable ways, as many

of those characterized as “essential workers” are expected to continue working with no adequate health and safety protections. We have seen horrific examples of people being subject to what Marx (1976, 899) called “the silent compulsion of economic relations,” a compulsion to potentially work themselves literally to death. These populations are often differentiated by race, class, and sometimes citizenship status and also by access to health-care services. Therefore, the pandemic

has demonstrated the grim truth that “those whose labor is indispensable are among those whom capital renders permanently disposable” (De Genova 2020).

But the biopolitical discourse serves to conceal this truth; if this capitalist doxa has largely remained invisible until now or, better yet, appears as an all too natural “landscape,” it is because biopolitics has been tremendously effective in concealing this political dispensation, for it

promotes the preservation of capital as a prerequisite for human life. In other words, capitalism interweaves throughout biopolitics: if biopolitics is the politics of life itself, one mechanism to regulate life is through political-economic considerations, where the power of capitalism and capital-labour relations intervenes directly to regulate life itself. As Foucault (1978, 140–1) reminds us, biopolitics notably emerges as “without question an indispensable element

The Biopolitics of the Coronavirus Pandemic: Herd Immunity, Thanatopolitics, Acts of Heroism

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¹ See Agamben (2020), Esposito (2020), Latour (2020), Lorenzini (2020), Nancy (2020), and Preciado (2020).

in the development of capitalism.” This is what is forgotten, or remains unsayable, during the pandemic: biopolitics operates at the level of “life” but always presumes a hierarchy of “populations.” It aims at cultivating human capital through logics of competition and accumulation, not human life per se. This is what makes capitalism coterminous with the emergence of biopolitics.

From this dim perspective, the coronavirus pandemic offers a rare opportunity for a critique of the biopolitical argument and a chance to reveal the life-and-death nexus that more often than not is clandestine in its operation. A closer look at the contemporary moment reveals that it is as if death speaks rather than life. We can hear the voices of the dead, of the disposable, or of those differentially exposed to the risk of death. In other words, in the current context of the coronavirus pandemic, death rather than life is “put to work” under a biopolitical mode of production.

Herd Immunity

According to estimates, one in five people have lived under some form of lockdown as a result of the coronavirus pandemic (Davidson 2020). In the face of the pandemic, some governments have decided that herd immunity is the only

Why would these countries pursue such a risky approach? The reason is thanatopolitics. Herd immunity is a terrific embodiment of how biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics as a specific means of accumulation and domination in contemporary politics. It justifies the prioritization of profit over people through concealing the reproduction of disparities beneath notions of a so-called “inherent justice” maintained by the “invisible hand.”

long-term strategy for dealing with the virus, as it may not remain contained and could resurge again in the future without a vaccine. Instead of implementing a full lockdown, only at-risk populations have been put into quarantine while the virus keeps infecting populations until they acquire herd immunity. While the UK later distanced itself from this strategy, others like Sweden, the Netherlands, Brazil, Turkey, and the United States continue to hold to this approach,

with tens of thousands of deaths.²

Why would these countries pursue such a risky approach? The reason is thanatopolitics. Herd immunity is a terrific embodiment of how biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics as a specific means of accumulation and domination in contemporary politics. Since the late seventeenth century, we have been governed by biopolitics, which

is the precursor of global capitalist management. It justifies the prioritization of profit over people through concealing the reproduction of disparities beneath notions of a so-called “inherent justice” maintained by the “invisible hand.” Most important, it has enslaved peoples’ minds by making them believe it is their fault if they are poor, precarious, or unemployed.

We live in societies riddled by racialized biopolitical violence that marks certain lives as supe-

² In terms of adopting herd-immunity strategies, there are differences between these countries. While the United States and Brazil explicitly adopt “full” herd immunity, countries like Sweden and the Netherlands officially embrace “controlled” herd immunity. Turkey, on the other hand, maintains some form of managed or “controlled social life,” as its health minister suggests, which is in fact a hidden herd immunity agenda in the interests of the economy.

rior and other lives as inferior. In this sense, the pandemic does not put us “on a basis of equality,” as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests (2020); rather, it maintains the necessary conditions in which the current biopolitical strategies are reenacted and reperformed so that life is continuously rendered sacrificable to capital. Thus, the enactment of the herd-immunity strategy sheds light on the productive but also dim and often disregarded side of the current sociopolitical structure, which we can see emerging on a strictly biopolitical level: thanatopolitics, a politics of life nourished by death.

A number of theorists have discussed the shift in which biopolitics becomes thanatopolitics, a politics of life that ultimately generates massive death in a system that is best embodied in the Nazi regime. Timothy Campbell (2011, 72) argues that the distinction between the thanatopolitical “letting die” of liberal biopolitics and the “making die” of totalitarianism “grows ever smaller under a neoliberal governmentality” that no longer operates to turn people into things but operates now “to crush the person and thing, to make them coextensive in a living being.” For Achille Mbembe (2003, 39), contemporary biopolitics is thanatopolitics; it is concerned with “the subjugation of life to the power of death.” In a similar vein, Giorgio Agamben (1998, 122) adds that “if there is a line in every modern state marking the point at

which the decision on life becomes a decision on death, and biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics, the line no longer appears today as a stable border dividing two clearly distinct zones.” Thanatopolitics thus stands in opposition to the “ontologisation of life” and the reductive ontologies of biopolitical power to make life live, which “disavows the corollary power that ‘lets die’ in the name of life” (Murray 2018, 718). This shift toward thanatopolitics demonstrates how bio-

politics is not only about fostering life but also about administering death.

Thus, the thanatopolitical shifts must be seen as the move from the formal to the real subsumption of life under capital, following Marx’s theorization from the formal to the real subsumption of labor processes. Describing the alienation that occurs with the real subsumption of labor under capital, Marx

(1976, 1025) describes what was once a uniquely human capacity, now externalized, that is “not only alien, but hostile and antagonistic, when it appears before him [the worker] objectified and personified in capital.” For Marx, “species-life” is inseparable from “species-being”—that is, the creative capacities of humans to constitute and transform themselves and their worlds. In the current herd-immunity strategies, we find not merely the creative capacities of the human species-being but also the functioning of life itself, externalized, made alien and hostile. As a result,

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increasing numbers of disposable lives are left to confront finance capital as “the life of the species.” What matters here is to trace how, in the name of COVID-19, herd immunity exemplifies a thanatopolitical economy that values life based on its sacrificability to capital.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the depths of social inequality and systemic injustice. It has revealed the wildly exaggerated and grotesque disparities in how illness, death, and suffering are “unevenly distributed” (De Genova 2020). We have witnessed how a whole tier of poorly paid and precarious workers are forced to make the impossible choice between staying home without income and going to work to likely infect others and be infected in turn. What starts to become apparent is some sort of bleak social-Darwinian scenarios, making plain that the sacrifice of some lives for the sake of others has been in the nature of the game all along.

Herd immunity entails a biopolitical relation between “making live” or “letting die.” As a perfect thanatopolitical measure, it is disguised as a move to protect the liberty of the affected populations. In reality, however, it is a perfect thanatopolitical solution that privileges profit and wealth over human life. In herd immunity, in other words, life has a value other than its capac-

In a neoliberal competition-based society that structures our personal and working lives, praising front-line health-care workers as heroes—and thereby glorifying the sacrifice they are currently making against the coronavirus pandemic—obscures the workings and operations of the biopolitical establishment. There is nothing heroic about involuntarily putting one’s life in danger in order to ameliorate conditions created by neoliberal regimes that thrive off of disposable lives.

ity to generate profit. Biocapital is now expanding its capacity to extract and capture profit from one’s reproducibility (Franklin and Lock 2003; Vora 2015), to one’s sacrificability. Some humans are “justifiably” expendable for the sake of others. What results is a system of biopolitical violence against the weak and the poor—elderly and disabled people, homeless people, refugees, and people with severe health conditions—many of whom are likely to also have a

lower socioeconomic status because of the correlation between poverty and illness (see Frey 2020).

Contemporary neoliberal economies renew this strategy with their institutionalization of a universal competition “in which fostering life and letting die become two sides of the same economic coin: you can have as much life as you can afford” (Short 2020). By escalating the intrinsic antagonism of life and

capital, the coronavirus pandemic has exposed “capital’s absolute and utter dependency upon human life-as-labor—which is to say, more precisely, capital’s constitutive requirements for the subjection of human life as subordinated (alienated) labor” (De Genova 2020).

Since the utter and abject disposability of human life is the enduringly manifest result of capital accumulation, herd immunity exemplifies a thanatopolitical economy that consumes

the future in the present. That is, a thanatopolitical economy that needs endless reproduction and circulation to remain “healthy.” As a consequence, life is rendered disposable, expendable, and sacrificial to a capital that is constituted and experienced as “Too Big To Fail.”

Performance and the Thanatopolitics of Heroism

Concomitantly, the thanatopolitical aspects of present-day immunity strategies are (re)produced through the performative acts of heroism. In this context, the performance of “political glorification” and the “collective cheering” of the sacrifice of those workers designated as essential normalizes the political sacrifice of life to capital. It is interesting to see how various enactments and rituals of heroism glorifying the performative sacrificialization of life justify the thanatopolitical management of COVID-19. They serve to maintain life at the expense of those rendered disposable by the thanatopolitical registers of neoliberal economies.

As things continue to unfold, it becomes clearer that any alleged oppositions between lockdown measures and herd-immunity strategies are part of the performative tactics that prioritize capital over life. The pandemic has thus illustrated how performance—as an assemblage of theatricality, spectatorship, reality-shaping illusions, and impositions of preassigned roles—plays a crucial role in the (re)constitution of the processes by which life is being sacrificed to capital. In the process, performance is often utilized as an efficacious tool that praises biopolitical mechanisms. Here, performance is not to be conceived

as a tool that is oppositional to reality but as illusions and appearances that perform, as performance-studies scholar Diana Taylor (1994) reminds us: that is, they make things happen and thus are world making and reality constitutive.

Let us pause for a moment and think about the “cheering and clapping” performances in which essential frontline workers, particularly health-care staff, are publicly and politically praised as “heroes” of our time. Sacrifice to capital becomes a cruel spectacle for the rest of us to watch and give standing ovation. Ranging from the Eiffel Tower’s “merci” to the two minutes of applause at public performances to the very expensive governmental campaigns that express gratitude to those who put their lives at risk on the “front lines,” people that deal with precarity in order to secure either legal or illegal employment are now rendered valuable through celebratory practices that assign value onto them based on their sacrificability. Unfortunately, in our biopolitically designated society, the name of a hero is evoked, or supported, by power when it is necessary “to obscure the existing forms of power and exploitation, praising some workers and systematically forgetting the rest” (Lesutis and Heras 2020).

In a neoliberal competition-based society that structures our personal and working lives, praising frontline health-care workers as heroes—and thereby glorifying the sacrifice they are currently making against the coronavirus pandemic—obscures the workings and operations of the biopolitical establishment. There is nothing heroic about involuntarily putting one’s life

in danger in order to ameliorate conditions created by neoliberal regimes that thrive off of disposable lives (Lesutis and Heras 2020). There is nothing heroic in sacrificing one's life to capital. Since the coronavirus pandemic is governed as a discontinuity in capital's preservation and promoted as inseparable from the preservation of life, sacrifice becomes "the antidote" (Kordela 2017, 59), maintaining capital through death. Thus, rather than using the language of heroism and participating in its performative legitimization processes—which are instrumental in making invisible the existing forms of power and exploitation inherent to capital—we need to think about the deeper relations that biopolitical regimes of power obscure from our sight.

The danger of embracing the language of heroism and reenacting the neoliberal scripts of sacrificial politics is that it helps power to absorb and typically to foreclose any political and cultural critiques that might shine light on the underlying powers, pretexts, and preconceptions that constitute the biopolitical argument. For Foucault (1997, 72), critique is the "will not to be governed as such." However, this will is always formed in resistance and contestation with existing governmental regimes. This will now requires a critique of biopolitics. Thus, rather than just applauding those workers who are being sacrificed for the interests of the political class, we need to engage in a long-term critical and creative effort that is

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not subsumed to capital. We need to reflect on how these performances and rituals serve the interests of the political elites and the divisions they create.

After all, power does not want us to recognize each other as exploited by the same biopolitical logic. It does not want us to transform asymmetries of economic and political power that have been shaped by class and race over centuries. There is, however, a destabilizing paradox inherent in biopower. As Hardt and Negri (2000, 403) insist, the same structures and forces that secure

the foundations of the rule of governance are the ones that weaken and may overthrow it. It is precisely the plurality and totality of this systematic and inextricable nexus that makes biopower fragile and vulnerable, as well as making it possible to instantiate new social networks through which collective action

may proliferate. Biopower thus offers a productive framework for creating alternative social and political paths that expose the existing forms of power and exploitation in our disastrous present. This is important to address because what we need is not to reform the biopolitical mode of production but to get out of it altogether. The need for radical rethinking of a new life and new social relations is more timely than ever.

The authors would like to thank Erdoğan H. Şima for his irreplaceable and encouraging comments.

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