



Biopolitics and its Limitations: A Comparative Analysis between Foucault and Agamben

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Abstract

In the current political scenario, the notions of biopolitics and bare life are essential in order to have a better understanding of the rationale that underlies various counter terrorism legislations, forceful occupation of land by the imperialist forces, spate of refugee camps, state-sponsored pogroms, age-old suppression of rights and of the voice of the masses in various Indian states and above all the prolonged Iraq and Afghanistan wars. This paper makes an attempt to understand how various political thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben in his notion of “bare life” and Achille Mbembe in his formulation of “Necropolitics” have reappropriated Foucault’s notion of biopolitics in different ways and broadened its application in order to understand the violence perpetrated by the state in contemporary times.

Keywords: Biopolitics ,Violence, Power, State

INTRODUCTION:

Michel Foucault’s course of lectures on “Society Must be Defended” ends with his theoretical formulation of biopower, a modern form of power that emerged in the eighteenth century, whose basic aim was to administer and multiply life, and demonstrates how by invoking the idea of racism this biopolitical mode of governance legitimates the murder of its population. In this essay I will attempt to demonstrate how the subsequent political thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben in his notion of “bare life” and Achille Mbembe in his formulation of “Necropolitics” have reappropriated Foucault’s notion of biopolitics in different ways and broadened its application. Apart from this, I intend to show by referring to some examples from the recent historical and political contexts how individual’s body becomes the site of resistance and violence, when in the name of modernity and democracy, biopolitics becomes a means of violent imposition for certain sections of society.

Agamben's philosophical approach to biopolitics differs from Foucault's in two important ways. First, Foucault did not take into account the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and the concentration camps, which Agamben views as the perfect sites of the modern biopolitics:

Despite what one might have legitimately expected, Foucault never brought his insights to bear on what could well have appeared to be the exemplary place of modern biopolitics: the politics of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century. The inquiry that began with a reconstruction of the *grand enfermement* in hospitals and prisons did not end with an analysis of the concentration camp. (Agamben *Sacer* 119)

Unlike Agamben, Gilles Deleuze in his 1989 essay "Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?" argues that Foucault's writings involve two different dimensions altogether, which include both a historical analysis of the incidents of the past and those of present and future. Referring to this essay, Arnold I. Davidson, in his introduction to "Society Must be defended", says, "Perhaps nowhere more clearly than in Foucault's lectures at the College de France do we see the balancing, the alternation, and the overlapping of these two poles."(Foucault xvi)

In one such lecture delivered on 17 March 1976, Foucault articulates his conceptualisation of modern forms of power (both disciplinary and biopolitical) by abandoning the ancient juridical model of sovereignty and, referring to the state sponsored genocide orchestrated by the Nazi government, raises the question: "How can one both make a biopower function and exercise the rights of war, the rights of murder and the function of death, without becoming racist?"(Foucault 263) Here Foucault appears to be more concerned about larger ethical questions, a point where biopower reaches its limits: how can a political system based on biopower, whose basic aim is to administer life, rationalize the right to kill and actively participate in a state-sponsored genocide? How to justify the possession of atomic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction by the state? And, here racism intervenes, not in the traditional sense of ideological operation, or the lies, but as a mechanism of biopower that justifies the murderous function of the state.

The Nazi government by treating its population as a mixture of "good" and "bad" races ensured the death of the so called inferior races and the degenerate in order to maintain the purity of German blood and make it healthier and purer. This overt confrontation with a section of its own population was, then, based on a biological relationship, not on military or political ones: "The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole"(Foucault 255).

Foucault, therefore was not unaware of the politics of the totalitarian state of the twentieth century as the major site of modern biopolitics. One can see that the French philosopher employs the conception of state racism as an example to show the operation of violence in a legitimate manner in the modern world whereas Agamben theorizes and builds upon Foucault's argument to show how camp has become a paradigm in the biopolitical mode of functioning and exception has become the rule under both democratic and undemocratic

regimes. Before coming to Agamben again, I intend to show by referring to the most personal and poignant of all accounts of the Holocaust from Elie Wiesel's 1958 book *Night* how until something like racism, or the increasing threat of terrorism (as the western forces are doing in order to prolong their continuation in Afghanistan and Iraq) is invoked, it becomes almost impossible to believe the deployment of violence as a political strategy within the biopolitical form of governance:

How it was possible that men, women and children were being burned and that the world kept silent? All this could not be real. A nightmare perhaps.... Still I told him that I could not believe that human beings were being burned in our times; the world would never tolerate such crimes.... (Wiesel 32)

For Agamben, the inclusion of "bare life" (what Aristotle calls *zoe* in the distinction he makes between *zoe* and *bios*) in the political life through the means of exclusion – in other words, law applies to "bare life" by not applying – accounts for such killings in the concentration camps with impunity, as the Jews were transformed into *homo sacer*, a figure from the ancient Roman law, "in which human life is included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)...." (Agamben *Sacer* 8)

Here we can find another major distinction between these two philosophers. Foucault's historical claim that biopolitics emerged in the eighteenth century is reformulated by Agamben who talks about correcting or completing the Foucauldian thesis as he traces its origin in the ancient Roman law and argues that "biopolitics is at least as old as sovereign exception" (Agamben 6). While Foucault in his genealogical approach "rejects the search for origins and instead traces the emergence of particular configurations of relations of force, Agamben seeks to illuminate 'originary' relation of law to life" (Mills 65).

Agamben, in his formulation of "bare life" compares the legal situation of the Jews in the Nazi camps to the so-called terrorists captured by the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, who enjoy neither the status of POWs (as defined by the Geneva convention) nor do they have the status of criminals according to the American laws. Stripped of all sorts of political and legal rights they are reduced to "bare life", and then are subjected to inhuman treatment. Just as the Nazi government invoked the idea of racism, according to Foucault, in order to legitimate the Holocaust, here the U.S. government is employing terrorism as a strategy in order to justify the subhuman treatment meted out to the detainees at Guantanamo, where "bare life reaches its maximum indeterminacy" (Agamben *Exception* 4). Because of the primacy of human life within the biopolitical form of governance, those elements who can be the potential threat to the society must be eliminated without any legal accountability, and those nations which are in possession of the weapons of mass destruction must be disarmed.

Achille Mbembe, underlining the limitations of Foucault's formulation, argues that the notion of biopower is insufficient to account for the widespread violence and death that have been the characteristics of recent times, as biopolitics has been transformed into "Necropolitics." Unlike Foucault, who establishes a relationship between modernity and life becoming the

target of political power, Mbembe links modernity with terror and argues that the latter initiated a series of technological advancements, which mechanised, facilitated and “democratised” death. For Foucault, with the help of modern technologies, the notion of death as a prolonged public spectacle was dispensed with and an emphasis was laid upon diminishing the pain of even those who had to undergo capital punishment whereas according to Mbembe these technologies aimed at “disposing of a large number of victims in a relatively short span of time.” (Mbembe 19) The opposition that underlies the arguments of both the philosophers can be perceived as a restatement of the age old dichotomy that lies at the heart of modern technology. And, Foucault hints at this paradox briefly, when in his lectures, he interlinks the intervention of state racism with the notion of evolutionism (the idea of the survival of the fittest race was central to the discourse of evolutionism) that emerged as a part of the nineteenth century scientific discourse. He argues that nineteenth century started thinking about the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, wars, criminality, madness, and mental illness in terms of evolutionism.

Looking at the various forms of reappropriations of Foucault’s conceptualization of biopolitics, one can argue that one needs to rethink about its applicability in other contexts as well. Interventions made by the biopolitical mode of power in order to ensure the well-being of its population can turn out to be highly problematic on some occasions, especially when such apparent benevolent gestures are resisted violently and carried out brutally as well. I wish to show, by referring to an incident that Dipesh Chakrabarty mentions in his “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History” that the history of modern medicine, public health, personal hygiene and other measures taken by the state to ensure the safety and longevity of its population, are deeply mired in violence. In other words “these are the undemocratic foundations of democracy.” (Chakrabarty 288)

Chakrabarty himself derives the current instance from Lawrence and Girija Brilliant’s “Death for a Killer Disease” as an example of the physical coercion that continues in the name of modernity. This incident comes from two American doctors (one of them presumably of Indian origin), who participated in a campaign to eradicate smallpox in a village of the Ho tribe in Bihar:

In the middle of gentle Indian night, an intruder burst through the bamboo door of the simple adobe hut. He was a government vaccinator, under orders to break resistance against smallpox vaccination. Lakshmi Singh awoke screaming and scrambled to hide herself. Her husband leaped out of bed, grabbed an axe, and chased the intruder into the courtyard. Outside a squad of doctors and policemen quickly overpowered Mohan Singh. The instant he was pinned to the ground, a second vaccinator jabbed smallpox vaccine into his arm. Mohan Singh, a wiry 40-year-old leader of the Ho tribe, squirmed away from the needle, causing the vaccination site to bleed. The government team held him until they had injected enough vaccine... While the two policemen rebuffed him, the rest of the team overpowered the entire family and vaccinated each in turn. Lakshmi Singh bit deep into one doctor’s hand, but no avail. (Chakravarty 289)

Here I'm not looking at the welfare instinct of the enterprise or the civilising mission, or any form of ideological imposition, but the way body in order to be regulated by medicine becomes the site of violence and resistance. The subtitle of the above mentioned article, which reads "How an army of Samaritans Drove Smallpox from the Earth" reveals the paradoxical nature of biopower.

Thus one can say that in the current political scenario, the notions of biopolitics and bare life are essential in order to have a better understanding of the rationale that underlies various counter terrorism legislations, forceful occupation of land by the imperialist forces, spate of refugee camps, state-sponsored pogroms, age-old suppression of rights and of the voice of the masses in various Indian states and above all the prolonged Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

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