

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Discussion on Biopolitics

Hello. So, this is Arjun and Saurav, both doctoral students in the Department of English. And this particular session is devoted to discuss of biopolitics. So, we'll start with the point Sourav has made in the arguments he has sent us, that biopolitics can be viewed also as a health paradigm now increasingly, which is done at the level of the collective population. And biological matter is being controlled through exercises of biopower, which is basically a Foucauldian paradigm. Sourav, would you like to go first on questions of biopower and collective populations, and then Arjun can respond.

So, what I was thinking at the level of, when we talk about biopolitics, because I think I mentioned this to a couple of Arjun also, some days back that is this the only paradigm we can think of? Because the surveillance, the idea of surveillance using biological matter as a key medium by any authoritarian government is one that we can come to, it is a common ground that we can all agree upon. But then are there different ways of examining or understanding how biological matter and its interaction with us, as a collective population, works. Because when I was writing the notes, I almost felt like an anti, like when in Covid times there were people called anti-vaxxers, they would not trust the government at all because they would say that through these injections the government would try to, at some level, try to inspect us and stuff like that. So, I was thinking is there any other way because when we talk about biopolitics and biopower and all these ways, like the first reason that came to my mind was this, I think in happening Oregon only with Sheela Anand, where she contaminated the town's whole water sewage system using what was first-of-its-kind biological attack, right? So, these I think this was sum up my opening argument thoughts like whether there is there only one way to think about outside the surveillance paradigm can we think about this question.

Yeah, that's a good take-off point actually because why do we have to assume biopower is exclusively surveillance or biopolitics surveillance. There is also the welfarist paradigm where for instance when you think in terms of statistical data about say unemployment or nutrition levels that are then subject to scrutiny, analytical purposes and then policy measures are put in place. But I'll hand this now over to Arjun. Arjun, response to Sourav.

It is a very interesting point to start with because I remember our having this discussion and I also thought because there was this piece Agamben was writing during the pandemic and we were all wondering I mean is this guy like out of his senses because he used to think rationally but now, he's talking against administering some foreign chemical into your body, some foreign body into your body. So like if you look at the history of the idea of power, governmentality or biopolitics and biopower as such like Foucault only has done a literature review and argued in his essay governmentality that earlier the sovereign or the state used to only consider the principality and not the population. It actually follows the idea of the pastoral power that how the church would take care of its subjects. Similarly, it draws from the idea of the pastoral power that you would have a knowledge of your citizen so that you can make policies better. So power in this case is not something that is necessarily restricting as you said. It is definitely welfare also but the thing is the line that demarcates these two are very what you say blurred. So, you do not know where surveillance start and you do not know where the constructive forms of power come because the notion of surveillance or the notion of grooming a population inevitably leads to the individualization and totalization of subjects because you would make new subjectivities, you would inevitably lead to the creation of new discourses where people would inevitably start believing or interiorizing these discourses and start to think that this is their subject status. So, it's not necessarily something that is repressive as opposed to the objective means of the state that we are so used to. It is much more complicated. It also exists as a relation between individuals within the state not necessarily something that flows from the top to bottom but also within the individuals of the state. I think I'll leave it here.

Yeah, that's interesting because also it is partially the responsibility of the individuals as we remember during the pandemic we were urged to be responsible citizens and Lisa Diedrich actually has this blog post on disregarding the health of others. So Sourav mentioned the anti-vaxxers, but there were people who absolutely refused to wear masks and she was speaking about the fact that "My autonomy trumps everything else. I really don't care if I am the cause of somebody else's health problems because I will not wear a mask. That's it." So disregarding, so there's also a sense of collective responsibility that comes into the picture when we speak about biopower and biopolitics because it's something we have internalized and what you said both individualization and totalization occurring shall we say more or less on the same plane but it also hinges on questions where our citizenship itself is defined in these terms. What Petryna refers to as "biological citizenship" and Sourav has something to say on that. Sourav, over to you.

Sir, yeah I'll come to the biological citizenship part of it later but what I found interesting when I was making my notes is that the idea that when you signify a population from a subjective position and this is done by the quote unquote "authorities" right? The idea of the gaze and in its bid to you know kind of collectivize and uniformize a varied

population of different color gender and what not. So, there's a gaze that is unintentionally created by the subjectivity of the authorities as such. So, and this is interesting because, this is ironic because when we talk about the questions of power and biopolitics the first question that first one that we say is that the individual subjectivity is taken up taken out and any human being becomes a number or what to say constituent part of a larger collective. So, this but in doing that the state then, the state then creates a subjectivity through which it looks at its own population. So, in other words state others the its own constituent beings. Right? So that is an ironic move that I think that that is very interesting to think about. first because you know as sir just mentioned that individualization and collectivization is also, like it seems like we are going on the talk of like a round and round thing right, because like too much individualization and too much collectivization almost feels like both sides of the same coin. So, I was thinking about this part that you know when especially in terms of times of something like the pandemic how does these questions of subjectivity can be used to frame a collective as such. And because subjectivity is a word which is generally used in a very personal point of view that "my subjectivity is greater than the others" but then through the creation of the subjectivity by the state itself, it starts to otherize the very constitution that builds it, the population. So, the state becomes a body a unique body that distances itself from its population.

Yeah that's a fantastic point because also although it is a distance itself it still remains in overall control. It's distant, distanced and yet part of it. So like we are part of the body politic of the nation and the governance of the body politic is assigned to the state which is where I think people like Agamben have a problem with vaccination and trials drug trials being part of state policy. The state is far too intrusive. Nicholas Rose's work also points in that direction. But it is also interesting to note that the state comes in the into the picture by also defining the borders of identities, communities, collectives, individuals and Arjun has something to say about border politics here. Over to you, Arjun.

No so I'd written in my notes about the sovereignty of the state because the state can only work if there are boundaries in place you have to other what is not part of the state to create an identity as such. So, when we conceive of the sovereign space we conceive if it has something autonomous which is largely homogeneous which has larger aspirations that are also coterminous in nature. We consider everything foreign as something that has the potential to contaminate this unity, this homogeneity. And this is ironically true of our bodies as well. Our body is also treated as something that has strict boundaries has a strict autonomy has a strict sovereign space but we know what happened when during the pandemic our bodies were not sovereign our bodies were not autonomous it was the case with our boundaries of the state as well most of the times the contamination happened within the state even without knowing that it was coming from outside when we kept our boundaries so tight we always had virus inside so when they were blaming Wuhan and

China for the pandemic I remember eight or ten months later they found in the sewage in Italy and Europe larger uh number of viruses from the sewage they had a test run of the sewage water there and figured out the virus was already there even before it became a pandemic it was already there so this goes to the idea about are we actually following these borders as a conceptual idea or is it the case that it actually it has some bearing in reality that do we live in enclosed bounded spaces which are not assailed by anything from outside I do not think that is the case here.

That is really untenable isn't it? When you think in terms of bounded hermetically sealed protected spaces by virtue of the fact that you have a body means you are exposed to the world because bodies are bodies in the world. There is no way of assuming a body which is not a body in the world yeah Arjun you have something to say? Arjun, you had your hand up? Okay no, what I was thinking of was the point you made and the assumption that bodies are autonomous and self-contained is a ridiculous assumption because bodies are bodies in the world and by virtue of the fact that you have a skin, the skin is a is the largest interface that you have with the world, and this enormous potential for any of the border points to be breached and it's interesting you bring up the examples because I think they discovered the bacterial and viral presentation presence in the water resources in England and they didn't know quite where it came from. But I also think that biopolitics relies on this uh the stories of origins where it came from. And you will remember that the anger against China transmuted itself into anger towards Chinese people. Almost as the Chinese were responsible for the for the for the parasite becoming pandemic and that is where I think the biopolitical paradigm becomes really dangerous. Because you have moved from surveillance of populations to surveillance of a bacterial or viral form and then turned it right back into surveillance of population for entirely different reasons but Sourav might have something to say on this. Sourav?

I was actually thinking on the lines of both of what you and Arjun was talking about Arjun what are the example of Wuhan. So I was thinking you know because how biopolitics also can work I was thinking one level is that you know with the cultural aspect right? When I think when it was widely circulated that the virus came from a particular region in a far East country, the whole eating practices the cultural practice of eating different kinds of meat came into came into the limelight, right? And then suddenly, these people were branded as being a bad kind of people who eat bad kind of meat, right? So they are responsible for this, right? And this is funny because this almost makes you feel that you're because and this is where and we are still not I think we have still not removed ourselves from the from the colonialist angle also and I mean sir would surely know that you know when how in the Romantic time for example the far East was constructed as this land of mystical yet dangerous place. I mean for example how like India was called, right? And even within the country, I don't know if I should address this, but you know different communities were targeted like you know like having this

kind of food, that kind of food, so the fact that human health can be a way also in how questions of you know superiority or colonial, I would say neo-colonial, because for example the same, as Arjun pointed out, was found in Italy or the same virus which was found in England and when the news came out, it was that considered to just a normal occurrence right? That that the virus could be anywhere. But the questions of identity being targeted and you know particular people being persecuted for the same of a virus circling around the whole world is also something fantastic, that we cannot we still cannot remove ourselves from this line of thought, so, yeah.

That's really very good and very interesting because the fear of the virus becomes the fear of the stranger; that your virophobia is actually translated into a xenophobia, just because people eat a different kind of diet makes them enemies the other the othering process that Sourav was referring to. And at some point in your notes, Arjun, you mentioned the fact that the creation of fault lines of identity markers eventually leading to surveillance and then of course to genocides and you can see the trajectory happening right? So biopolitics will begin at one end but their concrete realization if, you want to call it that, would be genocidal. But I was thinking that somewhere in between is the point that Sourav made about xenophobia where dietary practices become supposedly very clear boundaries between us and them. You know "oh you eat this, you are of a certain type of person" etc. Also, the attribution of moral values to people who eat certain kinds of food and those who don't, right? But Arjun would you like to say something about the progression of biopolitics towards genocides.

It is interesting that's why when we talk about welfare means when we talk about biopolitics as something that grooms the population it has a trajectory that can have a logic that eventually leads to genocide. I think Foucault makes a point every regime be it totalitarian, be it dictatorial, be it democratic, all the regimes have a similar rationale the end of it is a genocidal state. So, he says that the state or the Nazi state or the national socialism state is not any different from the current modern democracy we have because the organizing structure of it or the rationale of it remains the same, it has the potential to further jump gradations and reach there. So, here I think when we start from the point that sort of made the gaze of the state as something sitting there a center trying to other people at the same time abstract an idea of it, where individuality is flattened at the same time through which you are making a discourse that grants them subjectivity so you have flattened their individuality you have created a set of knowledge, which they later interiorize, to create certain identity markers. So you take census, you have idea of their caste, class, creed, religion, gender, sexuality, everything on the basis of which you are making certain parameters and this eventually, so here the health paradigms also come in ,now we are taking account of DNA's and looking at what population can be susceptible to certain diseases, illnesses, disorders and all that and we are trying to annihilate them even before they get expressed in the gene pool. So, this sets a certain identity marker,

creates a certain knowledge system through which certain subjectivities are interiorized by these people. So, when such a crisis happens these fault lines between these identity markers are expressed, they get highlighted. So, it is not the case that we are just afraid of strangers from outside, but we are afraid of strangers within. So, the body becomes contaminated the family treats the body as a contaminated one which has the potential to further blemish them or breach their barrier. Then the family and the community becomes one, then the community as such, then the state as such, so then larger national borders. So, isolation happens in this place with the prospect of containing it but the logical progression is that the isolation or the treatment of bodies can lead to further subjugation. I do not think it is much different or much distinct from the state of siege we have. So, when we declare emergency. At this time of pandemic, we also had certain state of emergency, it is not much different from there because the logic of assembly, the logic of rights, of the individual, all these things are pretty much the same. I remember during the smallpox that happened in India the bodies were treated with like as if they were going to destroy the entire population and some people were willfully sacrificed so that they wouldn't contaminate further population. And this is stories that we have heard in lores from people and it is accounted also. So, it's not that the fault line only happens in the community it happens at multiple levels to the level of the nation state trying to other the other, to the level of the internal enemy that has to be kept isolated and subjugated. And it is very interesting because it happens at varied levels.

And that is playing out at the level of global geopolitics, isn't it? When you have large segments of the world itself being you know marked for possible biological citizenship and Sourav said he wants to return to that point at some time. So, over to you Sourav, for biological citizenship and I would suggest that you move biological citizenship towards the point where Arjun also was talking about genocide and eventually, necropolitics with which we can end. So, over to you Sourav.

So the first point that struck me about biological citizenship is the is this simply the idea of how they how we define the population, right? I mean that the human being becomes numbers: the number of people affected, the number of people not affected. So, these things start to you know take over and at some point, for example, in the pandemic i remember, you'd only talk about, the days would start with, you know, the looking at news of how many people are getting, what is the percentage of the people getting better and other people dying. So, this is an interesting changing of identities that happen and secondly, and you know and this is, i don't know, see at some level you it's not also out of the ordinary because probably this is how the state as an authority also essentially has to view its people. Because, I mean, the state, because when we talk about census or when we talk about any collective information gathering practices, for example, it is done through numbers, right, so it's we don't really know we don't really see identities playing out or personal, what you say, personal relations work. And so, and then, and then after

the second part of what I what I thought I would talk about is that you know that how different practices like isolation then hospitalization, right, and then vaccination, sterilization all this all this become part of how the they are they become a series of checks and balances physically to make this work, right, to make this collective census kind of thing work. So the citizenship, so therefore, the biological citizenship can be only practiced if these checks and balances systems are in place, Otherwise, once again, if the population becomes human, as in like, they become some people we know, then it becomes a problem for the State again because when the when we are looking at identities tuned up as numbers it's easy to divide the points and I mentioned something in my notes also that States, you know, making marking the areas as red, yellow, green or you know, the idea that you know. So, and yeah and an obvious point here is that how successive levels of surveillance can be put in place to these individual practices also. But then that is the I think that is essentially the nature of any, I think, one point that Church talked about in the beginning was pastoral uh pastoral, I forget the full term or something about how the population was kept in check by the Church to maintain its safe to maintain its general well-being kind of a thing. So it's and then at the end of the day, yeah it is inevitable actually and this is something that comes out only when times like these are like more happens. Otherwise, I think we live in this kind of very safe notion that okay our identities are unique but at the end of the day we have become numbers for time for in doing these things.

Yeah, that's crucial also because of this tie-up between the state apparatus and the corporate apparatus which we now increasingly worry about. For example the pharmacological industry uh which prescribed Dolo on a large scale, which became controversial after the pandemic we discovered what was going on and the prescription drugs that are constantly pushed down our throats literally, actually, which points to this nexus between the corporate and the state in the factor of biopolitics making the others. And which eventually of course is the production of life and the production of death or as others would say, just letting people die. And we will we will move towards necropolitics now with Arjun's comments. Arjun?

So necropolitics has to do with the vulnerability and the recognition of vulnerability of individuals. So, we agree to this premise from the get-go of this course that everybody's vulnerabilities through the recognition or the acknowledgement of our shared vulnerability that we can coexist. but not everybody is helpless at the same time. And helplessness is distributed in varied ways across identity markers some people are more helpless than others it's like Orwell says "all animals are equal but not every animal is equal in the same way, all are equal but not all animals are equal in the same way". So, here, it is like that. So, some populations which are already at a disadvantage because of their identity are disposed off in this power nexus that happens between the state and the government. So, we remember the choices the tough choices the government had to make

when they were trying to roll out health care to a lot of people. So, there was and this is one point we came across in the section on old age also. While the old people were considered giving vaccines in the first place when it came to health care when they were put on life support, they were not the first ones to be getting care. And this we remember seeing in Italy they had to choose between and it went to the identity marker of their age. So old people were not given oxygen cylinders whereas young people, who might prove useful to the society at a later point in time, they were given preference over old people. And these things happen so this is a very clear indicator and this has a clear connection to the notion of productivity in the capitalist society. But at the same time, there are other factors that also work the factors which are much more subtler- of class, of caste, of how the current regime treats a certain identity marker. Obviously these people or these identity people who belong to this identity will also be preferred so it is it's simply a choice of who should survive here and who should not and it is. Also like if you want to be a citizen if you want to have the so and so freedom of traveling from a place to other trying to engage in the economy you have to adhere to these means and here comes the question of agency. The loss of agency happens in two ways it's because of the virus or the potential loss of the biological agency like as a subject who can act who do not need support from the health care, also because of the political system that has aggravated your vulnerability, you lose your agency, because you cannot avail the services. So if you do not have access to certain means of life support vaccination, not everybody is has access to vaccination, the same way people living in rural areas people who are poorer people who belong to certain identity markers, they do not have access in the same way to all these things. So, if you do not go through this check and measure system you will not qualify as a biological citizen. Then what happens is it's not that the state is letting you die in obvious cases like when you come to the hospital just because you are old you are not given oxygen cylinders, it is also that just to be a working or functioning citizen it becomes hard, because you cannot avail the services owing to the nature of your identity. So, the necropolitics is not as simple as we think in these cases. It is very wide it also depends on the identity of the people which aggravates gets aggravated due to the existing conditions of the hazard that is happening.

And with changes from regime to regime context to context so who is seen as quote unquote “deserving” of rights where people are arguing for health care as a fundamental right and there is now talk of therapeutic citizenship as a matter of routine and right, where as you rightly pointed out, Arjun, necropolitics has multiple layers and it occurs in multiple forms which is important. So as we have seen we have marched quite a bit from our argument about biopolitical identities as surveillance to questions of or are through questions of welfarisms which are also contingent upon identifying bodies, injurable bodies, degrees of injurability and of course our own participation in the system and that is where it becomes really tragically ironic because on the one hand you have to participate but on the other the means of participation are far, far more limited in terms

of, say, geographical location. The other day I was teaching in class poetry from Jayanta Mahapatra and Robin Ngangom and there is a statement where Ngangom says “I don't even want to meet the woman and her child who for the last several years”, and it's 50 years of independence in India, “have not had rice for a meal on any day”. So, it's a nicely topological spatial arrangement but the question is of something larger it's of biopolitics of letting people die and what I meant when I said letting people die is structures that prevent your participation in those very structures, identity markers which Arjun has repeatedly emphasized and the fact that by virtue of possessing an identity marker you're automatically disqualified. So, you are biological citizens precisely because your biology has been rejected. It's an inverted perverse way of thinking about it too that you know you have a biology but it's a biology whose cultural markers have rendered it null and void so to speak. I mean bodies are bodies but some bodies are not bodies because the overlaid cultural structures mean that you don't get past the structures to the bodies themselves. That has been a very beautiful and wonderful discussion so thank you both Sourav and Arjun for this longish journey in such short time through biopolitics. All right, thank you so much, and I will send the videos, after they are downloaded, to you. Okay, bye.