

COVID-19 AND THE FACES/PHASES OF BIOPOLITICAL FALLOUT

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Covid-19 pandemic defines not only the future of human life but also the fate of almost all countries in the world. China, America, Russia, Israel, India and many other countries have already invented vaccines to fight against the epidemic, but still the world is not yet relieved from the clutches of the disease. Many of these countries including, China, Israel, Finland, and Switzerland have already vaccinated their complete population and attained higher levels of safety and supremacy over other countries. In an article on the biopolitical reading on the covid scenario, Michael A. Peters speaks about completely vaccinated 'immuno-states' and the power exerted by them over other states. This article draws on such insights, and discusses the way these 'immuno-states' are struggling not only due to Covid but also as a consequence of the risk of bio safety, bioterrorism, biowarfare and bioweapon in the world. The paper would also analyze the concept of "immune-state" in the time of Covid-19 and the results of vaccination by employing Roberto Esposito's philosophical notion of the "immunization paradigm" (*Immunitas* 1) and Foucault's "governmentality" and "sovereign power" (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 12). Through a biopolitical reading, this paper also attempts to explore the social relevance of Esposito's "immunization" against biowar and bioterrorism as well as the emergence of a neo-feudalism to the contemporary situation.

Esposito's concept of 'immunity' that is used here is a philosophical concept that extends far beyond the body immunity.

According to Esposito, “just as the immune system functions for the human organism, law ensures the survival of the community in a life-threatening situation” (*Immunitas* 28). The Covid immunity attained by the immune- states like China, Israel, Switzerland and other countries are produced by their respective governments, with the help of vaccines developed by different medical firms and companies. Esposito describes this immunity as something that is “prescribed to preserve peaceful cohabitation among people” (*Immunitas* 28). In other words, Esposito defines immunity as something that is protecting our life from threats and this protective dimension of immunity later transforms in to affirmative biopolitics in his *Bios*.

Immunity against Covid in different states, is either forcefully created by the law and judiciary for the protection of community, or it operates in capillary circulations of power. For Esposito, community has nothing to do with possession and belonging, but it is portrayed as a “lack,” “a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given” or an “obligation” (*Communitas* 30-31). Out of fear, or sometimes due to social obligations, people gradually form communities based on nation, state, districts, villages, containment zones..etc and start to obey the rules. According to Timothy Campbell, the translator of *Communitas*, “community immunizes itself by constituting sovereign power. With the risk of conflict inscribed at the very heart of community, it appears simultaneously as its “intimate essence” (*Communitas* “Translator’s Introduction” xii). For each community, there had been no other options other than believing and obeying their governments for their survival.

As Ignas Kalpokas has aptly remarked, during Covid time, human life and health have become a subject of governance, through a series of containment measures such as quarantine, lock down, and many other modes of isolation. Government ensures biosafety and a

fruitful governmentality to the people through technologies these days. Mobile apps, vaccine sites, online consultations, online conferences, bill e-submissions, webinars, and other new technologically advanced life style modes control and track human life through online governance. As Foucault describes, these restrictions are internalized by the people as social norms, or in other words, people desire to be in the clutches of governments or online oligarchies rather than in the crushing grip of Covid.

Esposito speaks about the relation between community and immunity not only in *Bios*, but also in *Communitas: Origin and Destiny of Community* and *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*. Community and immunity connect through *Bios* by connecting his immunity paradigm to Foucault's notion of biopolitics. Biopolitics, as Foucault explains, is a neoliberal method of celebrating a new form of depoliticization by managing population and bodies “to regulate the behaviour of subjects” (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 7). When China properly immunized its citizens through vaccination and other drastic prevention methods, they were immunizing themselves not only against Covid but also from the threats of bioterrorism and recession. Covid-affected economies produced consequences in global capitalism as well, through stagnation. Moreover, it highlighted the weaknesses in public health and mental health, and consequently revealed the faults in the neoliberal capital accumulation and privatization in terms of investment, productivity and growth in general.

In some countries, things have become worse, despite effective governance and advanced treatments and medicines for the treatment of Covid-19. Corona virus severely affected the U. K. and the U. S. during the first wave. Their powerful vaccination measures helped them navigate the crisis of the second wave, and they are still

preparing for possible waves in the future. When China had managed the arrival of corona, American President Donald Trump had appreciated them for their efforts, but it was not easy for America to control the spread when they were facing it. The situation was even more pathetic in other more populated states like Brazil, Indonesia, Philippines and India. As Covid demands effective management and governmentality, people desire and willingly submit to various forms of governmental control, and they show appreciation and gratitude by reelecting and celebrating Governments that managed the Covid-19 healthcare crisis effectively, while some other countries faced severe criticisms for their inability to effectively control the spread of the virus.

The threat of biowar or bioterrorism still exist as one of the major security concerns of many of these countries, who are struggling to win over the pandemic. Perhaps the most appropriate definition of bio-weapons is given by WHO, which states that, “biological weapons are microorganism like virus, bacteria, fungi, or other toxins that are produced and released deliberately to cause disease and death in humans and animals or plants” (*WHO*). The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention defines bioterrorism as “an intentional release of viruses, bacteria, or other germs that can sicken or kill people, livestock, or crops” (CDCP). They include *Bacillus anthracis*, the bacteria that causes anthrax, as an agent to be used in a biological attack. There are news reports about Chinese conspiracy in using Covid-19 as bio-weapon. *The Economic Times* reports that “china has initiated number of steps to produce bioweapons”. More than that, Nalinkumar Mohanpatra, in this article gives a detailed research report on the studies of different researchers and reporters about the presence of dangerous pathogens in Wuhan lab. CDC Director Robert Redfield told CNN that “covid virus

originated in a lab” (*The Economic Times*). While many political commentators have discredited the bioweapon theories about the Chinese government, it is true that such dangerous rumours about the threat of bio-terrorism are deeply disturbing and stress the necessity of ascertaining the true source of the novel corona virus.

Biosafety is also a profoundly significant topic of discussion during Covid times. When human beings started to control all the forms of microorganisms on earth, they also started to raise challenges to human existence. There are safety issues when human beings are working in laboratories with these microorganisms to diagnose their characterization, therapeutics, and vaccine development. In order to protect the workers, the state should provide a biosafe working atmosphere. In addition to these security concerns, there are chances of microorganisms being used as bioweapons in war. Since biotechnology can control the upcoming population, the various elements of biowar pose serious threats to the entire humanity. Offering Covid-19 immunization and biosafety to the people is not an easy task without mobilizing private healthcare infrastructure and facilities and investments. Biosafety is undoubtedly is a matter of crucial consequences.

What one can recommend to this world now is an affirmative biopolitics and governmentality to bring about a better life in the future. As Foucault envisioned it, biopolitics is something that can “ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order” (*History of Sexuality* 138). Following and extending Foucault's perspectives on the biopolitical dimension of human life, Agamban has defined the human as a life form through which, “biopolitical body that is bare life must itself be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a bios that is only its own zoe....” (*Homo Sacer* 188). In other words,

effective control of body can elevate our life from bare life to a fruitful life or life progresses through state's control in the form of affirmative biopolitics. But when the state itself is in the control of an “online oligarchy” (Kotkin), a truly affirmative outcome in the mode of biopolitical control remains impossible to bring into being.

The involvement of private stakeholders in the process of vaccination at the population level can also have disastrous consequences that might even lead to the activation of a turn from biopolitics to thanatopolitics. Government's inefficiency to immunize the world may bring corporates to the field where the poor are excluded from the expensive and effective vaccines. For example, in India, the government provides millions of people with two types of vaccines for Covid: Covishield and Covaxin. The protection offered by these two vaccines are around 80% ,whereas Pfizer and Sputnik offers more than 90% protection. Also,the estimated effectiveness of Covishield and Covaxin is yet to be approved by the UN. This is an exclusion- inclusion boundary where a bio terrorism and bio-genocide is also possible through corporate involvement. The efficiency of Covid-19 vaccine may also define who are excluded and included in the survivors' chart. In such a situation, “biopolitics turns to thanatopolitics” (*Bios* 122), or in other words, death becomes a political one, rather than a biological one.

Covid-19 can also lead to the emergence of a neo-capitalism along with new forms of neo-feudalism and neo-corporatism. Fritz Sager and Celine Mavrot speak about the Covid policies of Switzerland, and how they helped to manage Covid-19 through neo-corporate reopenings. While lock down has severely affected and, in some cases, even vaporized small scale businesses, the corporates have been flourishing with unprecedented benefits, since most of them are operating on online platforms. Online companies like

Amazon have tripled their profit as a result of the pandemic, producing a fertile ground for the development of neo-feudalism. Joel Kotkin makes the following observation on neo-feudalism:

Our society is being rapidly reduced to a feudal state, a process now being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of small businesses are near extinction, millions more losing their jobs and many others stuck into the status of a property less serfs. the big winners have been the 'expert' class of the clerisy and most of all, the tech oligarchs, who benefit as people rely more algorithms than human relationships. (<https://joelkotkin.com/books/>)

In a situation where the governing power of the world will reside in a group of corporates, it is impossible to study affirmative biopolitics and thanatopolitics without analyzing the governing power of these corporates. According to Foucault, governmentality is an individual's autonomous capacity for “self-control.” It does not “juxtapose politics and knowledge, but articulates a “political knowledge” (*The Birth of Biopolitics* 14) through certain strategies. These strategies provide immunity to the people and government simultaneously. But in a world of neo-feudalism, it is difficult to implement affirmative biopolitics as the corporates overpower states. In such a situation, all democratic countries, capitalist countries and socialist countries are equally unable to control the situation except some of them with low population density.

In a neo-feudal world, neo-liberalism has a significant role as it offers “freedom of the political and economic subject, especially evident in the contemporary repetition of the idea of individual choice across all domains of life” (Mills 216), but the freedom offered here would be only the freedom of exclusion or inclusion, based on the

economy of the subject. Rather than being operated by the corporates, this biopower should be controlled by the fraternity of different states without “exclusion,” “inclusion,” and “abandonment” strategies. As Agamban places sovereignty as the centre of biopolitics, he says “it can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power” (*Homo Sacer* 6). Therefore, immunity should be inculcated through affirmative biopolitics without taking care of the inhumanity and criminality of emerging neo-feudal capitalism. Since the state - corporate interventions and the emergence of neo-feudalism in the time of Covid-19 bring forth an exclusion-inclusion boundary for the citizens based on their economical status, it is difficult to avoid the possibility of thanatopolitics in future. Therefore, the relevance and scope of the an affirmative biopolitics in the upcoming neo-feudal world through a global fraternity as a protecting guard from inhuman capitalist policies become all the more important.

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