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SYMPOSIUM: VIRAL TRAJECTORIES

Deconstructing COVID Time

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Abstract This essay explores the problem of trust and truth in states of emergency. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's theory of biopolitics and his objections to political managerialism I argue that the real problem exposed by the pandemic was not a lack of trust in authority but an unscientific and uncritical attachment to expertise.

Keywords Agamben · Biopolitics · COVID-19 · State of exception · Critical bioethics

In the second episode of the 2023 HBO television series *The Last of Us,* a professor of mycology is taken into custody by the authorities. She is clothed in a hazmat suit and then commanded to complete an autopsy of a woman who (it turns out) is the early victim of a fungal pandemic. After completing the work, the professor is asked about a vaccine. When she says that no vaccine is possible, she is asked how to proceed. Her advice, offered mournfully, is to bomb the country. She then asks to be taken home to her family. It is crucial that this event occurs in the second episode of the series, *after* we know what will happen. The first episode of the series has shown the viewers a post-pandemic world, where the fungus has transformed infected humans into violent monsters, *and* transformed the world into a biopolitical police state. The state of emergency has allowed the rule of law to be replaced by the threat of immediate violence and execution; this power that has emerged in a time of emergency is being challenged by a resisting group of freedom fighters. When the second episode flashes back to the early scenes of the pandemic, and we witness the expert professor issuing a call to exterminate the nation that is the plague's origin we *know* where this pandemic will go. With the benefit of that knowledge it seems that the call to extermination may well have been the lesser violence. This would justify, perhaps, a consequentialist ethics: if we know that a tragic harm would avoid an existential catastrophe then it may be justified. The problem with consequentialism is that we rarely (if ever) know the consequences of such actions. More importantly, how might we act if we ourselves do not know the future, but are informed by those with expertise that certain actions will have outcomes that we ourselves cannot forsee? *The Last of Us* poses a question that became intensely important throughout the 2020 pandemic: can privileged knowledge allow for exceptions to ethical principle? Can scientific/medical expertise and its declarations of emergency justify the curtailment of freedom? *The Last of Us* seems to place a bet both ways. Looking back on the mycologist's warning it was the hesitancy to do the unthinkable that resulted in the later scenes of utter wretchedness: *if only we had known.* Like many other post-pandemic

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dystopias, *The Last of Us* depicts the police state that manages the remnants of the world as an evil tyranny that must be countered by freedom fighters. There are subtler depictions of this problem, such as Hanya Yanagihara's 2022 novel *To Paradise* where the United States is ruled by martial law, but the problem is the same: *biopolitics and managerialism.* Does the State's task of securing life allow for a form of managerialism that displaces political deliberation? Managerialism, as used throughout this essay, is the form policy takes when there is a direct passage from expertise to prescription and where the ends of policy are not open to question but are reduced to the maximization of a population's life.

Prior to 2020, depictions of biopolitical managerialism were less ambivalent. In *Blade Runner 2049* climate apocalypse has reduced the world to mere survival and subjection to corporate rule by biotech corporations; this dystopian control of life is starkly contrasted with the utopian possibility of the "miracle" of corporate-free reproduction. The pandemic of 2020 exposed the limits of this simple resistance to biopolitical managerialism: what if the threat to life were so severe that it demanded the curtailment of individual freedoms? What if those who know better should be allowed to decide *for us*? How is this "we" determined—this community whose lives ought to be taken hold of for the sake of averting or ameliorating catastrophe? This is the key problem of biopolitical managerialism: expertise is required in order to safeguard life, and just what counts as a life worth saving is more often than not assumed rather than interrogated.

Here I will argue that the post-Kantian critique of biopolitics has been insufficiently attentive to the ways in which ethical principle has always been intertwined with the violence of managerialism. The respect for the utter sanctity of life is made possible—practically—by the subjection of life. When it is suddenly life that matters there will always be abandoned lives, unless we deconstruct the opposition between biopolitical imperatives and the forms of humanism that are defined through the simple negation of biopolitics. As long as the dignity of life, personhood, and reason are defined against the mere existence of biological life the very question of how and why life matters will remain unexamined. What looks like a distinction between life subjected to emergency rule versus the freedom of the individual are two sides of the same coin, where freedom can only be thought of as other than managed life. To return to the thought experiment of *The Last of Us*: we can refuse the exclusive disjunction between *either* bombing a country to save life in general *or* holding on to the purity of principle. Instead, we might think of a more bioethically attuned world where the mattering of life did not emerge only in states of emergency when "we" are threatened. This would amount to a broader challenge of neoliberalism and its norms of self-maximization. The government and media imperatives to eat well, exercise more, be mindful, sleep well, save and spend responsibly, and manage one's time are increasingly monetized and tethered to expertise: lifestyle coaches, personal trainers, smart tracking apps, and an increasing number of products allowing individuals to track glucose, hydration, bodyfat, nutrient macros, sleep cycles, heart rate variability, and stress. The embodied mind has been commodified and quantified with the unspoken neoliberal assumption that these numbers are commensurable and allow for a polity that renders itself increasingly efficient and profitable. When disasters interrupt the polity of self-surveillance questions of just *how* one comes to know about one's own body and health come to the fore. *The Last of Us* benefits from a gaze that knows how the future unfolds, and precisely because of the state of emergency is able to focus on a single threat to life, and a single domain of expertise. Biopolitics operates as if this were always the case: life must be saved, and there are those who know exactly how to achieve this end. Rather than think of states of emergency as exceptions, where questions of how we know about life must be suspended, it is better to think of biopolitical managerialism as an ongoing but occluded form of the state of emergency where *how* we know about life and *who* we ought to trust are not open to deliberation.

In the not-quite wake of the 2020 pandemic it is possible to pose again—within the frame of bioethics—the late twentieth-century question of biopolitics. States of emergency and disaster capitalism have always been at the margins of the privileged polity: one might think of the way Hurricane Katrina allowed portions of the U.S. population to be abandoned, or the way the AIDS epidemic came to matter only when it threatened "us all." The distinction of the 2020 pandemic was its inescapability and the sudden intrusion of emergency measures on populations who had, until

then, outsourced their fragility to zones of precarious life. Suddenly the affluent West was forced to confront questions regarding the politics of *life*. Even though these affluent regions included populations deemed disposable, it was now the entire population who had to confront the brutality of limited resources and the risks of exposed life. "Morgue trucks" were visible from the most affluent streets of Manhattan,[1] and even if the high profile COVID-19 case of Donald Trump being helicoptered to hospital demonstrated that wealth and power could promise life-saving care denied to the general populace,[2] this exceptional case highlighted a more general exposure. In the popular press various consequences were drawn regarding what the crisis of a pandemic might do to general assumptions about truth, trust, rights, and authority. Often the culprit was deemed to be "postmodernism" and its incredulity towards metanarratives. If we have learned to question everything, then how can we find any form of collective ethics in times of crisis.[3] Just as frequently the problem was deemed to be neoliberalism and its reduction of ethical concerns to individual self-maximization, so much so that one could no longer think of actions in terms of public health.[4] The focus on *life* only exacerbated the problem: once life is at stake, who gets to decide how to manage life?

What the pandemic brought to the fore, then, was a legitimation crisis that was a long time coming. How might we act well, collectively, in the absence of any foundation—in a secular, post-metaphysical and (possibly) post-truth era? Biopolitics operates on the assumption that *life* is now "our" foundation: but how does life become manageable and something one might maximize? How might we act well in an era of neoliberalism where selves are oriented towards self-promotion and self-enhancement in a milieu of competition and zero-sum game advantage? I want to argue that the two apparent theoretical causalities of the pandemic—postmodernism and individualism—should not only survive in an enhanced form but enable an ethics worthy of the intensities of twenty-first-century life. They should do so, however, in a modified form. Rather than an opposition between "following the science" and asserting one's freedom, genuine political freedom would require an ongoing attention to the fragility of life and the ways in which individuals are composed by attachments to authority that can (and should) be questioned. This constitutes their freedom: how to compose social relations and ethics not simply in the absence of authority but in a world in which authority is multiple and fallible.

Ethics in the Absence of Life

If bioethics is the problem of negotiating the relation between the abstraction of principles with the practical compromise of questions of life, then the shape of this problem can be traced back to Kant. (I do not seek to fetishize Kant as a name but use his proper name as a marker for a different temporality of thinking). Kant was one of many writers responding to the question of what enlightenment might be, and of how one might forge an ethics of freedom and autonomy that would not result in a chaotic war of all against all. What might ethics be in the absence of foundations or knowledge? Of course, we do know about many things to a greater or lesser (but not absolute) degree of certainty; but knowledge is open and multiple. It was Kant who insisted that there can be no direct transition from theoretical knowledge, or what we know about experienced matters, to what we ought to do. However much we know there is no way that this would give us the authority to command the future. The jury is in on climate change, but even with this degree of certainty there is still no direct course of action: geoengineering, carbon taxes, eco-terrorism, or degrowth are all possible and not fully compatible options. If I tell a lie, just this once, because I claim to know what's best, I make an exception of myself (claiming to have privileged insight). Not only does Kant insist that it is unlawful to do so—the very idea of behaving ethically is destroyed if each one of us creates exemptions—it reduces other persons to mere means. How might we act if we did not rely on what we happen to know or want? For Kant, we would be able to think of ourselves not simply as determined living bodies but as agents capable of thinking beyond the merely given. On the one hand, Kantian

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/opinion/coronavirus-morgue-trucks-nyc.html.

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/06/24/nightmare-scenario-book-excerpt/.

[3] https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/postmodernism/.

[4] Huang, L., Li, O.Z., Wang, B. et al. Individualism and the fight against COVID-19. Humanit Soc Sci Commun 9, 120 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01124-5.

individualism generates a resistance to authority and precludes the outsourcing of ethical decisions to experts; if something is genuinely ethical then it ought not rely on privileged knowledge. On the other hand, resisting authority does *not* amount simply to thinking for one*self*. To think *without* the privilege of knowledge precludes simply asserting one's wisdom, authority or expertise. It is the *absence* of knowledge that creates genuine collective respect, not the securing of ethics by way of one's own "research" or "the science." Think of the way, throughout the 2020 pandemic and beyond, mask-wearing or quarantine were targeted as forms of mindless, brain-washed, or sheep-like behavior. This was, supposedly, because people were not thinking for themselves; but those who accused others of being uncritically compliant invariably did so from their own putative positions of wisdom. Those who complied with public health measures *and* those who resisted restrictions in the name of freedom more often than not claimed to be "following the science." Each side—generally parsed between those who deemed the pandemic worthy of exceptional measures versus those who ostensibly held onto their own right to determine their behavior—could pit science and critical thinking against brainwashing. With each side claiming to be thinking critically and following the science—resulting in an exhausting fracture of any sense of public health and public goods—it might be easy to blame the history of criticizing and refusing science's authority. I want to argue the contrary. The problem is not the lack of trust in authority and evidence but rather the practice of countering authority with *more expertise.* It is the faith in firm foundations—including, and especially, the absolute foundation of life—that allows a single metric of life to create a politics of abandonment.

The key point of Kantian ethics, and the postmodern and liberal legacies of Kantianism, was to be able to act *without* foundation. Even if one were to act for the sake of life one would have to do so *as if* one's actions would be acceptable for any subject whatever; it *is* coherent to imagine that any possible subject could act from the principle to respect life, but it is *not* coherent to act as if one might engage in terrorism for the sake of securing life. If everyone were to take this as a maxim it is possible that life in general would be imperiled. Terrorism requires making an exception of one's actions on the basis of knowing better; Kantian ethics insists that there can be no such ground. Knowledge can inform but not override an ethics that must act in the absence of any foundation. This absence of ground includes one's specific attachments and opinions. If what I happen to know or want cannot be said to be true for any subject whatever, then I am compelled to think in terms beyond my own interests and received ideas (O'Neill 1990). "Freedom from imposed tutelage" does not amount to knowing more or better than others, and resistance to authority does not lead to a facile relativism (Kant 1996). On the contrary, there is a truth of the relative (Deleuze 1993, 21). If one does *not* know better one is obliged to think of others not as beings whom we might manage but as beings also capable of thinking freely. Far from this being a luxury that we cannot afford in a global crisis such as a pandemic, the autonomy of ethics becomes significantly more important. In a state of emergency, when action needs to be taken that will have consequences for us all, it is the very composition of this community of disaster that ought to be held open.

The problem with biopolitics and the management of life is its unquestioning closure of what counts as life and what counts as a life worth saving. If one thinks of simply preserving one's life then *any* public health perspective might appear to be nothing more than the imposition of order for the sake of political expediency. By its very nature, though, public health measures are *not* geared towards the survival of individuals but the management of populations. There is, or ought to be, a difference between the genuinely collective management of populations for the sake of public health and the neoliberal managerialism that has been dominant, especially in pandemic emergencies. The difference amounts to a question of time. A collective sense of public health includes a consideration of the preceding, ongoing and multiple formations of knowledge that enable a care for life, and *not* a single knowledge authority dictating measures in an isolated state. In a polity where education, nutrition, healthcare, safety, housing, and reproductive freedom are available the management of life becomes a complex and collective endeavor. If the means of life are increasingly granted only to the privileged few it would follow that states of emergency and securing life can only be achieved by a managerialism that has no frame other than maintaining its own order.

In an era of increasing privatization and neoliberalism the very sense of population becomes

increasingly nothing more than the aggregate of individuals with competing interests. Knowledge, along with health and all forms of social engagement become increasingly privatized. Freedom, and thinking critically, become personal attachments to one's own authority and interests, and *not* the sense of the forms of social whole that would free individuals from precarity. Freedom is increasingly reduced to the right to opinion rather than creating social forms that enable the time and space for critical reflection. As long as thinking critically amounts to nothing more than competing accounts of "following the science" freedom and autonomy will remain privatized but not individuated. Each one of us will have our opinions and authorities but will not have thought about the way in which our attachment to authority generates *who we are*. In neoliberalism "we" are nothing more than a capacity for self-affirmation and self-promotion; it should then be no wonder that any form of collective endeavor—such as the forms of collaboration required in times of crisis—becomes an arena for further competition and affirmation, further endorsement of one's own authority and authorities. "Following the science" becomes a way of affirming one's choices when it would be more ethical—more attuned to the collective predicament of being without final knowledge—to think about the multiple paths created by any science. The conception of science as necessarily open, because not secured by any transcendent or absolute foundation, was one of the early casualties of the pandemic. When public health advice shifted—such as the U.S. Center for Disease Control's change of policy on masking—there was very little sense in the public sphere or mass media that science is necessarily dynamic (Karan 2022; Kenworthy et al 2021). An absence of trust is inevitable if one works from the premise that science ought to be stable and secure, and not an open field of inquiry composed from multiple matters of concern. A more critical and individuated sense of the positive volatility of science is difficult or impossible to marry with a biopolitical ethics of science as a foundation for action.

When it comes to ethical imperatives—especially in states of emergency where consensus breaks down—*science does not exist.* There are sciences, all negotiating multiple aspects of multiple "objects," including life. There is no "science" as such that provides a straightforward answer to the management of life and no science that determines life as such. The 2020 pandemic was a medical emergency and a public health emergency; often this produced competing imperatives, but even if one were to take the individual body as that which must be saved at all costs there is still no direct line from science to policy. What *did* drive the public health imperative was resource management or the life of the managed population. Other public health emergencies were set aside, and other life-saving imperatives—free healthcare, public housing, prison reform, ending domestic violence—remained in the background. You could "follow the science" but which science were you following, and what was the end of that science? Rather than each side in a debate claiming to "follow the science"—which generates multiple and conflicting imperatives—and rather than eliminating deliberation for the sake of saving the world, global emergencies expose the urgency for a profound anti-foundationalism.

Questioning authority, thinking for oneself, holding on to one's freedom and autonomy might appear to be luxuries in a time of global pandemic, but this is only because these critical gestures have been thoroughly privatized—fully grounded on who "we" already happen to be. Authority is challenged by "doing one's own research"—which usually involves exploring highly monetized, data-gathering, and attention-mining online resources. "Doing one's own research" rarely involves forms of collective thinking that would question the ways in which life has been systematically damaged by the same industries that are saving "us." Questioning the capitalism of biotechnologies by refusing the vaccine is a thoroughly privatized gesture. Mobilizing collectively to achieve universal and non-profit healthcare is a form of resistance that opens the question of life and how it matters.

What appears to be an exclusive disjunction: either submit to public health imperatives *or* assert your freedom is no real opposition at all. Either choice would be akin to a preference, consumer choice, or mode of identity. Prior to the pandemic, and especially after the 2016 election of Donald Trump, those who followed authority were deemed to have a certain conservative personality type, while those who thought critically were—supposedly—more left-leaning (Pettigrew 2017). The problem is not how this diagnosis of personality types may have shifted in the pandemic (Young, et al. 2022; Powdthavee, et al. 2021) but the deeper problem of thinking about

politics, biopolitics, and public health as ways in which individuals respond to authority—in terms of acceptance or refusal and in terms of the type of person they happen to be. What the privatization and individualism of this terrain leaves out of play is a questioning of authority *as such* (which would include one's own interests, habits, and opinions) and a sense of freedom that is not confined to the marketplace of ideas or freedom *from* others. Overcoming the opposition between collective responsibility and individual freedom requires thinking more critically, and historically, about the ways in which states of emergency, or threats to life, shut down the very forms of collective ethics that global catastrophes ought to occasion. In short, faced with a threat to life or who "we" are—an existential threat—do we place ethics on hold for the sake of saving humanity in general *or* do we rethink the ways in which what counts as "humanity" and "life" has been premised on increasingly privatized conceptions of existence, including a polity that is the aggregate of individual (and competing) interests?

States of Emergency

Giorgio Agamben's theorization of the "state of exception" had a timely translation into English. The 1998 publication of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* provided a theoretical framework for criticizing the post-2001 war on terror and the formation of detention camps such as Guantanamo Bay. The "war on terror" ostensibly saved the United States by securing a space where bodies were not granted the rights of personhood. For Agamben, whose focus was both on the modern camps of Nazi Germany and the long history of sovereignty, Western politics had always been a form of biopolitics: the securing of an ethical-political space by marking political life from bare life. Sovereign power generates a space of law and right but in doing so produces a remainder of abandoned life. Crucial to the operation of sovereign power is its capacity to suspend itself, such that *any* life can be exposed to immediate force and become nothing more than bare life. In the ongoing war on terror, and other forms of camps and detention centers, the state's power *always* harbors a potentiality to exempt itself from the rule of law. The state is always, in part, a police state—capable at any point of acting immediately and violently to preserve itself. The law must always have at its margins the force that secures the space of law. For Agamben, the "we" or "us" of Kantian universalism—the "humanity" that must always be treated as an end and not a means—is secured through spaces of abandonment and destitution. Agamben's central example of *homo sacer* (drawn originally from Roman law) is the Nazi death camp, where bodies were placed outside the range of law and personhood *by the law* (Agamben 1999). This state of exception, Agamben argued, is increasingly not exceptional; sovereign power threatens "us all" when politics is assumed to be the securing of life. It was no surprise (but nevertheless disheartening to many) that Agamben saw the public health measures of the pandemic as an intensification of Western biopolitics: persons become nothing more than means, subjected to the end of sovereign power's efficiency (Agamben 2021). One of the reasons why Agamben's criticism of quarantines and mandates lacked nuance was that his legitimate and important questioning of biopolitical managerialism had never reckoned with the racial and geopolitical logics of the state of exception.

I would not be the first person to criticize the general theory of biopolitics in terms of its incapacity to consider the thoroughly racial formation of Western sovereignty and its necessary biopolitics (Weheliye 2014). The work of Sylvia Wynter has been crucial to the analysis of the ways in which "man" and "life" have been central to the history of racialized narratives of the human (or humanist narratives of race). For Wynter, those shifting arguments about the crises of "man" have always created and required the racialized other-than-human (Wynter 2003). This shifts the problem of biopolitics significantly: it is not just, as Hannah Arendt argued, that political life must free itself from mere labor or life, but that this production of freedom was racial. For Arendt the free, deliberative, and principled life of the polity was made possible by allowing the needs of life to be secured elsewhere (such as the slavery that was so much a part of the Athenian polity) (Arendt 1998). Arendt argued for a political existence of deliberation not dominated by efficiency, managerialism, or life. Rather than rethink the production of this bare life, Arendt sought to bring all persons into the sphere of the political. Agamben, indebted to Arendt, placed more emphasis on the ongoing and constitutive abandonment of life

by sovereign power. Rather than a politics of humanization and inclusion, Agamben proposed that life *not* be so abandoned—or that life not be considered so bereft of form that it required political redemption. Could there be a politics without the increasingly insistent proceduralism focused on managing life? For Agamben the means for securing the efficiency and seamless functioning of the state was the capacity for bodies to be nothing more than life—a potential Agamben saw as constitutive of all nation states. The problem was, for Agamben, *the State* and the ways in which sovereignty could always allow life to be mere means for the sake of its own continuance. However, what Agamben referred to as the "anthropological machine" (Agamben 2002)—or the division of the human space of law from mere life—was always a racial machine. This was not just because Western colonization, imperialism, and industrial levels of enslavement produced spaces of security through means of dehumanization but because the structure of biopolitics occludes the question of what counts as life that matters. The states of emergency that suspend political deliberation in order to secure life oddly assume *and negate* the norm of deliberative life. In order to matter one must be the normative subject of reason and reflection; but one must reason and reflect within the norms of what counts as manageable life. The sovereign state relies at once on rendering destitute and disposable those seemingly not blessed with the powers of reason (and this is especially the case in neoliberalism's imperatives for self-enhancement), while also shutting down any meaningful critique of the worth of life. In the case of the 2020 pandemic there was at one and the same time a general biopolitical tallying of cases and deaths, such that life had become calculable in terms of a single quantity, coupled with a widespread abandonment of life through long-term privatization and profiteering of healthcare systems, neglect of aged care, homelessness, and endemic racism.

Why does race and its elision in the theory of biopolitics mean anything when thinking about pandemic politics? It is partly a coincidence that 2020 was both the peak year of the pandemic and the year that saw the efflorescence of the Black Lives Matter movement; both had different genealogies, but both those genealogies intersect in ways that require revisiting the concept of biopolitics. The conception of *life*—as that substrate that might be managed, enslaved, bought, sold, maximized, and manipulated—was made possible by forms of sovereign subjectivity that were geopolitical, colonial, and racial. It is not just that the critique of any ethics posited on *life* presupposes a subject of decision and self-formation that has been forged through racial capitalism, it is also that the aftermath of the formation of "the human" through histories of slavery and colonization creates the conditions for twenty-first century legitimation crises. If life offers itself as that which grounds politics then we can all "follow the science" and not question the ways in which science already harbours norms of life.

If one were to remain strictly within the critical sense of biopolitics as theorized by Agamben and Foucault then Agamben's 2020–2021 responses to the pandemic make perfect sense. Quarantine measures, vaccine mandates, mask mandates, travel restrictions, and data gathering apps would transform the polity into a calculable, manageable, and manipulable mass of life. Such security measures allow politics to be nothing more than the securing of life; states of emergency become the "new normal," so urgent is the task of keeping "us all" from falling into statelessness. If one were to be strictly Foucauldian one would add to this reduction of politics to managerialism the reduction of knowledge to nothing more than data to be followed, as if there were simply something like *life* capable of yielding an immediate knowledge, with politics following on from that knowledge (Foucault 1972, 51). Resisting biopolitics would amount to creating ethics as something other than the maximization of life. My concern here is less on what Agamben and Foucault offer as an alternative to biopolitical managerialism and more on whether their forms of critique can survive a global pandemic. What forms of ethics are viable in a state of emergency? The best way to answer this question would be to explore the ways in which "life" has increasingly been produced as *at risk, as in a state of crisis.* This is how twentieth-century racism shifted from a colonial imaginary (focused on cultures that were supposedly not-yet civilized) to an imaginary of life as a constant emergency requiring vigilant policing and executive orders.

The crises of life that generated the Nazi death camps and Guantanamo were fabricated from racial and geopolitical anxieties. The health of Germany was not threatened by those it exterminated, but the sense that life was in peril allowed for a totalitarian

politics that would achieve its future through any means necessary. The imagined end of pure life, and the threat to pure life, enabled a politics of any possible means. This is why pandemic analogies between states of emergency and Nazi Germany were not simply exaggerations but confusions of kinds. The state of emergency was fabricated in the case of Nazi Germany, along with a part-nostalgic and part futurist ideal of pure Aryan life. In the case of the war on terror, the United States *had* suffered a trauma at the hands of terrorism, but the United States's history of manufacturing imperiled life had already created the structures that could respond in summary fashion to existential threats. From fears of miscegenation that enabled Jim Crow to McCarthyism and the "war" on drugs or terror, the fear of corrupted or threatened life allowed the polity to suspend its rule of law for the sake of securing its own operating power.

The circumstances that intensified the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 demonstrated both the truth and the ideology of the critique of biopolitics. The murder of George Floyd—which to this day still has its public deniers[5]—was an exemplary instance of biopolitical force. The police can, and do, act immediately, violently outside the frame of law. It is this threat—always present—that secures the polity in its lawful mode. That general threat of becoming bare life is only half the story. In the United States it is Black life that is the means through which the power over life in general has been displayed (Sexton 2010). We can agree that "we" are all at risk of becoming *homo sacer,* but the freedom of this contemplation is the ongoing exercise of this sovereign power over bodies of people of colour (as well as other abandoned persons). If Europeans like Agamben could react with horror in the face of quarantines, data tracking, mandatory vaccines, border closings, and mask mandates it was precisely because—for so long—such measures were the means through which secure life in stable nation states had been secured but over bodies that were not "ours." If it were possible to escalate biopolitical decisionism in the midst of a pandemic—where tracking of cases and management of resources dictated policy—this was because some sense of the polity as freedom from life's exigencies had already been forged through a long history of slavery, colonization, indentured labour, and terror.

The pandemic was not simply a state of emergency—as though precarity and abandonment struck the polity from without—but the intensification of a longer history of regarding *our* life as imperiled along with an attachment to forms of authority and expertise that had always secured *some* lives. Rather than continuing to follow "the" science that secures the normative forms of life that compose the polity as an aggregate of rational and self-maximizing decision-makers, the pandemic provides the opportunity to follow (and undo) both the sense that *life* emerges as an unquestioned and single good in states of emergency *and* that one might rely upon authority and expertise in times of crisis.

[5] https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/tucker-carlson-george-floyd-death-what-media-didnt-tell-you.

Declarations

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