

Biopolitical Economies of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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One place to start thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic from a biopolitical perspective is with the work of Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito. Esposito notes that since the 18th Century's "discovery" of biological science, considerations of biological life have increasingly moved to the centre of our politics (Esposito 2015). We can see this quite clearly in the overlap between different types of security measures, whether one considers the threat of mass terror or the threat of viral infection. Many recent measures, undertaken in the name of security, end up focussing on biological aspects, such as, for example, biometric monitoring, and the infamous forms of racial profiling that take certain physical features of populations to be a direct indication of their violent intentions. In the case of COVID-19, the public health measures taken against the virus suggest such a clear equivalence with politically motivated security measures that Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben recently asserted that the measures put in place to contain the viral spread are directly transferable into the terms of the political state of exception (Agamben 2020). From Agamben's perspective it is not hard to draw the deeply pessimistic conclusion that security measures of any type can have only negative and equivalent ends, so that protecting the life of a vulnerable population from disease is tantamount to, say, opening a concentration camp (Agamben 1999). It seems difficult from Agamben's viewpoint to distinguish between measures designed to save life and those intent on destroying it.

This observed overlap between biological and political life can be traced back to the work of Michel Foucault. In his three-volume study of the *History of Sexuality*, the first, titled *La volonté de savoir* (The Will to Know), has become a touchstone for subsequent thinking about biopolitics (Foucault 1978). Here Foucault makes two claims that are worthy of consideration in the present COVID-19 context. The first claim is that there has been a decisive shift in the evolution of human societies over the last several centuries from taking or extracting life and letting live, to fostering life, or letting die. The second claim is that this shift is highly significant for the political future of the human species. As Foucault famously puts it, "For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" (Foucault 1978: 143).

It is easy to see the importance of this second claim for the measures that states are putting in place—or not, as the case may be—to the future of, if not exactly the species, at least to a relatively large minority of it. But the first idea is relevant here too: were it not for the shift to what Foucault calls the fostering of life, the comparatively low lethality of COVID-19 would not threaten as many lives as it does now across the globe, indicating that all societies have in some minimal sense attached their biological lives to their political strategies. These biological stakes—given the absolute numbers of potential victims of the virus—put unprecedented pressure on the political measures and strategies developed to manage the lives of the global human population.

It is worth returning to the first of Foucault's ideas, that there has been a shift towards fostering and protecting life, rather than taking or deducting from it. The experience with COVID-19 so far also brings out the complications latent in this idea. The problem with Foucault's periodization shows up in the potential objection that there has never been a time when human politics did not affect the animal life of the human species. The distribution of health and longevity has long tracked the (mal)distribution of power, wealth, and resources, both before the shift to fostering life, and after; not only within rich societies, but especially in the colonial context of predatory extraction, slavery, and other forms of forced

labour. It was Marx's insight, before it was Foucault's, that under conditions of capitalist production there was a new sense that an extractive relationship to life was still very much in effect, as workers became valued commodities for the sake of the (biological) labour power extracted from them. As workers toiled away in brutal factory conditions to enrich wealthy industrialists, the latter were able to convince themselves that they were virtually a different species of human beings. It did not take long for the naturalized hierarchies of the past to reassert themselves according to which some humans are "justifiably" expendable for the sake of others. The dominant paradigm of neoliberal capitalism renews this principle with its 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.

It is evident that in a sense the COVID-19 crisis serves to highlight this perverse form of fostering life by providing a kind of litmus test of the neoliberal logic of our global societies over the last several decades. In this sense, we can see that although our biological life and that of our political systems are deeply interconnected, there is something in the nature of an exigency, of an objective surplus of the biological over the political, in the strain imposed by the virus on our healthcare systems, food and medicine distribution systems, labour rights, and the ways that life chances are affected by profoundly unequal distributions of wealth and income. In turn this exigency clashes with the capitalization of biological life, its translation into the calculation of economic value, by reasserting—as the very idea of health care must—that life has a value other than its capacity to generate profit.

Those polities—to the extent that it makes sense to see them as distinct entities—that treat the COVID crisis as a true state of exception to extant neoliberal rationales and practices stand a better chance of saving lives than those doubling down on treating life only as a commodity. The former seek to recapture something of the fostering of life outside its exploitation by capital, while the latter leave life to fend for itself, which in this context is to let it die. One thinks here of the problem of quarantine in relation to worker's rights. Those countries, such as Denmark, who commit to providing full pay for workers who must self-quarantine or whose places of employment are shut, stand in stark contrast to societies, such as the United States, where a whole tier of poorly paid and precarious workers are forced to make the impossible choice between staying home without income, yet with expenses as usual, or going to work to likely infect others and be infected in turn. Meanwhile, the strain on chronically under-funded health care systems in times of neoliberal austerity expose in the starkest terms—those of life and death—the hollow claims that market efficiency provides the best of all possible worlds. It is not surprising that those who persist in these logics (one thinks of Boris Johnson's initial policy musing about "herd immunity") are led into the bleakest Social Darwinian scenarios, making plain that the sacrifice of some lives for the sake of others was in the nature of the game all along.

What starts to become apparent here is that some sort of socialization of the costs of this pandemic is virtually inevitable for the sake of another vital piece of human life: the material means of life itself. What is perhaps hopeful in this is that the decades-long, solemn intonation from political leaders, pundits, and central bankers, that neoliberal austerity is as inevitable as any law of nature, is being publicly exposed as false. In this sense the crisis of neoliberal austerity is the crisis of a model of artificial scarcity designed to facilitate the normalized concentration of wealth, the shifting of life chances up the social pyramid. COVID-19 opens a breach in the order of neoliberal capitalism that it does not (fully) control. Although COVID-19 is hardly something to be celebrated, it does provide a space where alternatives, such as direct cash transfers to citizens, suspensions of mortgage and rent payments, fully paid sick/quarantine leave, cooperative production of medical necessities, COVID-19 testing kits, and even single-payer health care

systems, suddenly enter the realm of the thinkable. The Overton window has suddenly opened in the direction of thinking an economy organized for the benefit of the vast majority of people; in this sense consistent with the public health measures designed to protect life. While governments will no doubt emphasize the temporary nature of these measures, the attempt to return to business as usual is not guaranteed, especially if such “socialist” measures show their efficacy and superiority over capitalist business as usual.

In the absence of a viable movement from below (and possibly even with one), no one should discount the possibility of a post-pandemic dystopia imposed from above. Of course, what is equally inevitable is that those whose lives are already protected by great wealth will push back as soon as possible, and are already presenting the massive bailout of financial institutions as in the general interest, as we previously saw in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Not only this, but new technologies of surveillance and control might well be utilized to track and stigmatize those exposed to infection, especially if—in the absence of a widely distributed vaccine—recurrent outbreaks are possible or likely (Lichfield 2020). In this context the mobilization and channeling of affect and panic is a powerful weapon in the arsenal of those who wish to reassert their social and political dominance.

Perhaps what all these facets of the present crisis highlight is the inevitability of a struggle over how we are governed, a struggle, that is, over the ways that politics and biology will interface and be configured. This struggle will be both what Marxists have called class struggle, and at the same time, will be a struggle for the future of the human bios or form of life. In this sense a biopolitics from below, as Panagiotis Sotiris has recently suggested, is needed to restore some semblance of democratic control over the coming shape of human life (Sotiris 2020). To return briefly to Esposito’s work, the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that there is a common mutual vulnerability, an impersonal exposure and entwinement of our lives with one another’s that cannot be permanently concealed (Esposito 2010, 2012). The complex institutional artifice of society, especially as this affects the existing distribution of life qualities and chances, can temporarily allow us to forget this mutual dependency, a dependency on those even with whom we have nothing in common save life itself. The space of the political—with all its risks and opportunities—opens at the point where this common dependency or vulnerability of one life to another is exposed.

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Biography:

Jonathan Short teaches in the departments of philosophy at York University and in the Communication Studies Programme at Glendon College of York University. His research interests include the relationship between biopolitics and neoliberalism, as well as how the latter has facilitated the rise of right-wing populism. He has published on the relationship between French and Italian thinking on capitalism and biopolitics; he is currently working on a paper examining social media platforms through the lens of the biopolitics of affect manipulation and strategies of government.