

## **Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction**

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### **Biopolitics, Biopower and Vulnerability - I**

So, this is our set of lessons on biopolitics and vulnerability, which we'll be exploring over the next few sessions. And we'll start with biopolitics, biopower, and vulnerability. This is the first part of what we will be doing. "Biopolitics" was a term coined by Michel Foucault and he defined it as the power or tendency to and I quote, "to rationalize problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birth rate, life expectancy, and race". So, the key idea here is that biopolitics is the control and management of biology, specifically of large populations.

And it is the employment of power, which eventually is called biopower in these writings, is employment of biopower upon populations. And this power could take many forms. It could take the form of medical services, welfare measures, population control techniques, we read about this very often, surveillance of segments of population, either small groups or large groups, labor laws, and of course, extreme cases such as camps. Camps, as you know, are of many types, refugee, concentration, extermination camps, and so on and so forth.

The key is to recognize that power asserted on populations is an attempt to administer, to optimize and multiply life. Effectively, it is the control over life and subjecting life to regulations, law, and other forms of social, political and administrative control. As Foucault would say, biopower and biopolitics would focus on species, that is the body imbued with, and I am quoting here, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes, which includes, says Foucault, propagation, birth and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy, longevity, and all the conditions that had caused these to vary. The supervision, writes Foucault, was affected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls, a biopolitics of the population. So biopolitics is the management of life.

By life, we don't mean necessarily biological process of an individual organism, but life as applied to a large body, a large population, a large group of people. Now state biopolitics, which is basically to say governmental biopolitics and biopower, these

construct categories of populations, vulnerable populations, deviant populations, threatening populations, and then the state proceeds to manage, control and administer these populations. We have already looked at questions of what vulnerable groups are as defined by the United Nations and we have mentioned that United Nations has categories of quote unquote “most vulnerable” groups. When the state or the state apparatus, the government itself proceeds to construct such categories, classifying people as most vulnerable or deviant or threatening populations, it will then proceed to enact laws, measures to control and manage these populations. Sometimes as we know in the case of the Nazi state, these measures can be of very extreme type: sterilization, imprisonment, and even extermination.

Nazi Germany for instance enacted policies to manage the birth and population of epileptics, those with identified mental disorders and so on and so forth. And the idea, the purpose, the intention was such people must not be allowed to reproduce because they add to the overall weak populations of the state. This was an extreme instance and example of how biopolitics works. Biopolitics then is the assertion of the power of the state, who can live, who can reproduce and who cannot. Like I said, as I give you the example from Nazi Germany, the Nazi German state administration decided that people with certain levels of physical or mental infirmities must not be allowed to reproduce or if they are not allowed to reproduce, sometimes may not be allowed to live.

Historically speaking, biopolitics has been employed by humans also to control the non-humans, as in animals and plants as well. So, these are also instances of biopolitics as many contemporary studies show that when humans set out to control other humans, they also use similar politics and similar political strategies to control the non-humans. So biopolitics often involves the assertion of power, state power, over individuals and the individuals and populations are then restricted to specific spaces such as ghettos or camps and we shall look at some of them as we proceed. So, our first example for biopolitics in action has to do with medicine and biopolitics and because we are all now looking at these lessons, these texts and these materials in the aftermath of the pandemic, COVID-19, several of these examples should be still fresh in our mind from what we have been reading in newspapers and the public discourses. Examples of medicine and medical biopolitics involve in history, plague towns, entire towns demarcated such a site as plague towns, quarantine measures, all of us know these terms now, sanitation and hygiene regimes and population monitoring exercises during pandemics and epidemics.

Foucault notes that biopolitics and biopower was most visible in the rise of a discipline called public health in 18th century Europe. Why? The argument made was taking care of a city meant taking care of the body politic. So, there is an intrinsic link between the bodies of the populations as in the material or the corporeal bodies of the population and

the health of the city itself. So, there is a link between body and body politics. Any sickness in the body of the population as argument went would lead to a sickness in the state itself.

So body politic as in the body of the state and the body of the individual populations are both meant to be monitored and kept healthy. Take for example the Edwin Chadwick *Report on The Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Populations* first published in 1842 and the quote is up on your screen. I quote, “it is now a matter of everyday notoriety that there are around us in the city innumerable causes of disease and death over which at large if not an absolute control has been granted to us. To remove these causes and thus to reduce to a minimum the risks incidents to life is the object of sanitary reform”. What is Chadwick actually saying? Chadwick's report on the sanitary conditions of the labouring population is arguing that our job in the way of sanitary reform through the modality and mode of sanitary reform is to minimize the risk of disease and death among a large population.

If you recall what I just said a moment ago, the key to the health of the nation is the health of the populations. So, if the population of the state is sick, the population of the country is sick, then the health of the nation deteriorates. That is often the link between body and body politick as I said. Body politick in this case is often spelt with P-O-L-I-T-I-C-K with a K at the end. Biopolitics is marked by an emphasis on the isolation of the sick, the control, the monitoring and the regulation of urban spaces, the monitoring of the identifiable sick or diseased people, the creation of specific locations where the unwell, maybe incarcerated hospitals, quarantine zones, hot zones, exclusion zones, the city mapped and demarcated into specific places.

And of course, the mandatory regimen of medical and dietary, sanitary and behavioural activities by those diagnosed as sick. Which means effectively that the state monitors the health of its people and ensures that a minimum level of sanitation and minimum level of nutrition in terms of their food and a decent amount of medical care is given to the sick. So, as you can imagine, you first have to identify who the sick are, then you place the sick in a location where they can be constantly observed and monitored and then you give them the necessary treatment. So, what you have done is you have segregated and segmented the population. You have placed people identified as sick in a specific region, a ghetto, a camp, a hospital, a quarantine zone, whatever it might be called and then you monitor them.

So you put all the sick in one place and you observe them, you treat them. This is how quarantine hospitals, lock hospitals, leprosia or leprosy hospitals emerged. It's also this kind of politics of monitoring the sick is also the root of the Contagious Diseases Act.

And some of you might recall that during the pandemic in India, the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 onwards, the government, the central and state governments both invoked the Contagious Diseases Act, the Public Health Services Act and others whose origins are actually in 19th century British India. And this brings us to a very important point actually that although these practices were initiated in 18th century Europe, by these practices I mean the surveillance of the sick, the categorization of the sick, these practices were invented there but were also exported to the colonies in Asia, Africa and other places which effectively means and you can imagine how this must have been done during the colonial period that the medical services, the public health systems were put in place, the laws were created and then transported.

They were implemented also in the colonies. And here you have two examples. One is from an image, a photograph from Poland 1911 during the cholera pandemic and it's the making of a cordon sanitaire. And as you can see from the term itself, it is a "cordon", a closing in, a limitation, a kind of boundary marking exercise to do with sanitation, a cordon sanitaire. Some of you may have met this term frequently during the pandemic as well.

And the other is a passage from Charles Dickens' well-known novel *Bleak House*. And if you look at that passage, Dickens is highlighting the ruined human form, the ruined, the deteriorating, decaying human form: "as on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps and vaults and bones and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever and sowing more evil in its every footprint". Look at the very visceral description in Dickens. Look at the power of the realist description, where he's speaking about disease, where he's speaking about the rot, the decay. And please understand, this is not about human bodies alone. It is about the entire city, the entire nation, the entire civilization collapsing as a result of a specific kind of infection which is spreading.

So that was part one on medicine and biopolitics. I now would like to move to the second example, which is on welfare and biopolitics. So, it's not that biopolitics focused exclusively on medicine and medical health. It also focused on vulnerable populations through the creation of welfare systems. And for this particular purpose, the state's biopolitics from 18th century again, began to classify the population as a deviant or sick or mad or poor or vagrants. And after doing so, after making this classification, it developed modes of surveillance, reform, welfare, etc., which supposedly were meant to serve the above, these categories of people, by which we mean the categories of people identified as mad or sick or vagrant. And then it began to monitor them.

And the intention was to make sure that they lived a decent life. And the control of these

supposed deviant populations enabled the creation of specific structures. What do I mean by this? Once you have identified populations as deviant, once you have identified populations as sick, then it becomes your duty to make sure that they're taken care of. The question is of, as I said, not just controlling them, but also making sure that they are safer, they are healthier, and so on and so forth. Take this instance from William Wordsworth's famous poem, "The Old Cumberland Beggar". And I have a little excerpt put up there.

"And, long as he can wander, let him breathe the freshness of the valleys. Let his blood struggle with the frosty air". If you know a little bit about this poem, the poem deals with an old beggar whom the poet speaker makes after several years. And there is an attempt to put the old man in a poor house. And the poem concludes with a prayer: don't put him in the poor house. "May never house misnamed of industry make him a captive!" And towards the end, he says, as you can see, "as in the eye of Nature he has lived, so in the eye of Nature let him die!"

So, what is Wordsworth actually doing? Wordsworth is saying, while the beggar is a beggar, he makes his rounds regularly, wanders through the village. Let him be there. Let him remain there. And what he is saying is that "may never house misnamed of industry make him a captive. For that pent-up din, those life-consuming sounds that clog the air". And then he says, "be his the natural silence of old age! Let him be free of mountain solitudes and hang around him whether heard or not".

What he is saying is, the beggar is already embedded in a system. Every morning he sets out to turn his rounds. If you haven't read the poem, I would recommend that you read it. The beggar proceeds on a round. At every house he stops, the people come out and give him some food and he continues. That itself is a system. That is the system of charity which the village ensures. And Wordsworth says, this way the beggar is free. So don't put him in a poor house. A poor house was created from the 1700 onwards by the poor laws where the poor were placed and they would be given minimal food in exchange for work.

We will come to that in a minute. What he is saying is, let him be free. Let him not be put away in an old age home. But it is significant to understand something else going on in this poem. Poverty is the result of a lower economic and social status. And this status is prior to aging. As in, it is throughout his working life, working within cows, that the man has remained a beggar. The economic dependency of old age is not the result of age. But because his income levels have always been low, his social security benefits have been minimal. There have been no savings. There has been no retirement plan, health care option, nothing.

So he is always dependent on the villagers to take care of him. And why should Wordsworth say that, let him continue? What Wordsworth is doing is, he is showing the

village charity system as better than the state-run old age homes. Wordsworth wishes that the beggar continue his walking, continue to be begging, continue to live and die eventually in the lap of nature. But if you think very carefully, this is also a biopolitical system. Because the beggar goes on a round systematically every day.

He is under surveillance, isn't he? He comes to every house, begs for food, goes to the next house, begs for food, goes to the next house, begs for food, and so on and so forth. Which means the beggar's routine is established. The village and the villagers know he will turn up at a particular place at a particular time every single day. How is this substantially different from poorhouses? Wordsworth claims that this old beggar, who has been walking for the last 70 plus years and begging for food, is still free. If you look at the poem, he says, the freedom of air, the freedom of nature, the freedom of wandering about.

Look at what he's saying. "Be his the natural silence of poor age! Let him be free of mountain solitudes" Let him wherever he wants he can sit down and rest and listen to the birds and eat with his "chance gathered meal". Now "chance gathered meal" actually is not a very good thing. What he's actually saying is he may or may not get food. "Chance gathered" would suggest that some days he may not get adequate food. Some days he may have to starve. And also think to yourself, how would it be in winter for an old man to be wandering around the countryside hoping for shelter, hoping for food. Wordsworth calls this freedom. But is it actually freedom? Wordsworth says, let's not put him under surveillance.

Let's not put him in a poorhouse. He'll be very sad, he'll be very unhappy. Yes, that's fine. But the question is, is he free? Is he economically, socially autonomous? Hardly the point, isn't it? As a beggar, he has a routine which he must follow, which he must adhere to. And even then, his meals are chance gathered. It's to ensure that even such poor people will get some food, that welfare measures were created in the 18th and 19th century, particularly in European cities. And these were directed at ensuring that the poor had a minimum level of support, that they had a place to stay, that they would get three meals, etc. But, but they had to work. So there is a certain politics, a certain biopolitics about this quote unquote welfare system.

And you will see the image from *The Microcosm of London*, 1808, where there is the workroom at St. James's workhouse, the people are working. And if you see, if you look at the foreground, there are people who look like officers who are inspecting what's going on to make sure the poor are working. So, workhouses and poorhouses were designed as spaces in which the poor would find some work, some shelter, and in exchange for work, they would get food. This means, and if you think very carefully, it's a common case event in contemporary cities around the world, the poor will be taken off the city streets

and put away in workhouses. Now, why is this important? It means that the upper classes, the middle classes do not have to encounter the poor in the city. The poor are taken away, they are hidden. They are also carefully, securely placed in poorhouses. Now that is biopolitics under the guise of welfare. Because what you're doing is you are ensuring that the poor are not roaming around begging. You're not wandering around here and there begging for food.

You're not disturbing the pristine beauty of, say, London. You lock them away, you put them away in a poorhouse. And they are not a burden in terms of begging for charity because they have to work for a living. Or rather, they work for food and shelter. What does this mean? It means very simply that the poor, the vagrant and the unemployed are not going to be drifting from here to there. They will be supervised. They will be kept in particular places.

Now here is an excerpt from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Well known text. “ ‘At this festive season of the year, Mr. Scrooge’ said the gentleman, taking up a pen, ‘it is more than usually desirable that we should make some slight profit for the Poor and the Destitute’ ”. So the gentleman is saying, we must do something, it's Christmas, we should be more generous and charitable and compassionate. And Scrooge's immediate question is, “ ‘Are there no prisons?’ ” The gentleman says, “ ‘Plenty of prisons’ ” . And Scrooge asks, “ ‘And what about the Union Workhouses?’ ” “ ‘Well, of course, they are.’ ” So says Scrooge, “ ‘The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigor then’ ”.

Now ask yourself this. The big question that is being proposed here is, what do we do with the poor? The answer is, you can send them to two places, either the prison or the poorhouse. So, if you put them in either the prison or the poorhouse, they can be monitored. So, note how this is supposedly during Christmas, an act of compassion and charity. It is supposedly welfare. So, the question being asked is, what do we do with the poor? Well, aren't there prisons? Yes, of course, there are prisons. Aren't there poorhouses? Of course, there are. Why don't you send them there? Now note what is being proposed. If in the first example, we looked at medicine and biopolitics, the idea was that we incarcerate them and place them under supervision, place them in very close monitoring systems. Here it is in the guise of welfare. And what we are saying is, once you have put them away in poorhouses, they will be taken care of. But are they really being taken care of? And this is where the question of biopolitics becomes very important because what is being proposed is in the guise of welfare, like I said a couple of seconds ago, you are placing them in a location where they can be monitored.

They don't get free food. They are not being given charity. They have to work. But most importantly, they are also taken off, taken away from visible site. They are put away in a place where the upper classes are not offended by the sight of the poor. We know this

happens all the time, right? That during big public spectacles, you don't want the visitors to the country to see the poor. What do you do? You put them away. You blanket them out. You invisibilize them. So biopolitics is effectively being put in place here in the guise of either restrictions on their movement or in the guise of welfare and compassion, which also means that you place them under surveillance. Biopolitics effectively is surveillance, either to punish them or to take care of them. We will look at some more of these instances later. Thank you.