

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Lecture- 02

Biopolitics, Biopower and Vulnerability - II

So, with our lessons on biopolitics, biopower and vulnerability, this is the second of the lessons here. And we will start with a couple of examples that illustrate what we will be seeing as the link between race, space and biopolitics. And the first example is from arguably one of the best-known pieces of literature in English literary history. That's *Robinson Crusoe* from Daniel Defoe. And if you look on the left side, there are three accepts where Crusoe says he has enclosed five pieces of land and he has put them in and put the animals inside and he has placed gates around them and so on and so forth.

He has fenced them in and then he speaks about how with infinite labor he had placed hedges with stakes and it was stronger than a wall. It's interesting and important to note that Defoe's Crusoe first describes the island where he is cast away as his prison. Then he calls it his "bower" and then "castle". And that progression is important.

He moves from prison to bower to castle. And by the time he reaches castle, it's very indicative of ownership. And where does this ownership begin? Where does it originate? The answer is when Crusoe, abandoned on a deserted island, begins to acquire control over other life forms, begin to assert power over other life forms, that's when he begins to call his island his castle. Which means effectively when Crusoe, the castaway, the abandoned Englishman acquires power to control the lives of other people or in this case other non-human forms. People aren't yet on the scene.

Friday will appear later in the text. That's when he begins to sets the place as his own, as something he controls, as something he has power over. So, what does that mean? If you look at the excerpt here, he writes, "It was the sixth of November, in the sixth year of my Reign or my Captivity, which you please...", and note the language, "in the sixth year of my Reign or my Captivity which you please". And he asks, "How can he sweeten the bitterest Providences, and give us cost to praise him for Dungeons and Prisons? there was my Majesty the Prince and Lord of the whole island? I could hang, draw, give Liberty and take it away and no Rebels among all my subjects. My island was now peopled and I

taught myself a very rich in subjects and it was a mere Reflection which I frequently made, How like a King I look'd”.

Note the tone, the tenor of this passage or set of passages. “My reign of my captivity”. Remember what I just said a few minutes ago, he moves from describing it as a prison to describing the island as his castle. So is he a captive? Well, he starts off thinking he is a captive. But by the sixth year, he starts thinking of himself as a “how like a king I look'd”. And what about the life forms on the island? Well, they are all my subjects. He is the Prince, the Lord, the King, the Sovereign. He has absolute power over them. And he says, I could hang, draw, give liberty, take it away. Effectively, what Crusoe is saying is, he has absolute authority over the lives of the life forms in that particular territory on that particular island.

This is biopolitics. Biopolitics is the power of the sovereign to grant life or issue execution orders, to bestow life or death upon the people. In this case, the life forms. So, is the island my prison? Well, it is a prison. But right now, in my sixth year, I reign, I am king.

What's Crusoe doing? What's Crusoe saying? Crusoe is saying that right now, I have absolute power. So, his ability to determine as he says, I can grant liberty, or I can take it away. And there are no rebels, nobody objects to what I am doing. The power to define someone else's life and death is what gives Crusoe the power of the sovereign and back control over life is what we call biopolitics. So, if you were to think in terms of islands and Crusoe's power over it, the 20th century and remember, Crusoe is 18th century and if you move to the 20th century, it's a large leap but in the previous lesson, we have already looked at medical and welfare biopolitics and we have discussed in some detail the biopolitics of the poor house and the sanitary regimes.

Here we come to a different set of examples. The two images here are from the Bloemfontein concentration camp, the Second Boer War and the other is a labor camp inside Nazi Germany. And why are these examples important? The answer is very simple. During these camps, the administrative officers had absolute power of life and death over the inmates, over the residents. They could do whatever they want.

They could take away their food, they could issue death, orders of death and execution, they could condemn them to labor, they could give them minimal comfort or more comfort, they could take away their warm clothes during winter, they could do, more or less, anything. And this power over life and death is what defined the concentration camp. And the concentration camp is an extreme example, yes, but it's not an extreme example in the sense that it has never been done, it has taken the logic of biopolitics to a

certain extreme. The bureaucracy determined who would live and who would die, who would be assigned to labor, hard or other kinds of labor. And no questions would be asked.

In the concentration camp, within the space of the camp, no known rules, humanitarian, welfare, social rules applied. It is called a concentrationary universe because it concentrated things including extreme conditions of life and death. Some of you may know the famous incident where the people were consigned to hard labor and were told that “you will work and the work will set you free”. This was also the Auschwitz slogan, that work will set you free. But in order to labor, in order to do the kind of work expected of you, you needed proper nutrition, you needed proper diet, you also needed better living conditions.

None of those were provided. And instead, you were told work sets you free. But how does work set you free if you are unable to work, well then you die. Now the logic of labor suggests that the labor should be physically fit to work. They should also have the emotional strength. If you have seen your family being massacred, being tortured and sent away to the gas chambers, what kind of labor are you? In the concentration camp, as the famous narrative goes, there is no “why”. You can't ask “why”. Why are you doing this? Why am I being treated like this? That's not a question you could ask. The control over bodies and lives was absolute. Eating and drinking and sleeping and medical facility and work were all regulated.

So if you have read any of the Holocaust narratives, the concentration camp memoirs, they were woken up at 4 in the morning, they were made to stand out in the snow for roll call with minimal clothing, they were undernourished, most of them were undernourished and many as we know died of starvation. So, the concentration camp was one instance, but well before the concentration camps or to be more accurate as a parallel to the concentration camps, there were other structures in place. And this was the ghetto system. And one of the most famous was the Warsaw ghetto of which there is an image for you to take a look at. And that's a picture of the Warsaw ghetto from June 1942.

And the ghetto was a structure created under Nazi occupation and the links will tell you where to go that's from the Holocaust Museum. And you see such ghettos also in apartheid South Africa. The ghetto was a biopolitical system where people of particular races and ethnic identity were segregated. So, these were marked by signs which said “whites only, blacks not allowed”. And you will know that in colonial India too, British India that is, you had similar signs where you if you were an Indian you could not enter certain spaces because these were marked as “whites only”, a sign board was “whites only” and you would penalize for going there.

South Africa as we know under apartheid divided the towns, “black town”, where the African, native population could live and the “white town” where the white rulers upper classes, middle classes all lived which means basically you demarcated, you segmented the place. The Warsaw ghetto during the World War was also something like that where the Jews were all confined to the Warsaw ghetto and the Warsaw ghetto is also well known because it was this scene of a major uprising, it's called the Warsaw ghetto uprising. But what does the ghetto do? The ghetto is interesting because the ghetto concentrates all the people in one place so that they could be placed under surveillance. You will remember what we have said about cordon sanitaire, the poor houses and others in the previous lesson where the poor, the vagrant, the sick were all incarcerated and incarcerated in such a way that whether it is the police or the doctor, the law or the medical services, the welfare people or the police could all go and check on them, could surveil them. In the case of the Warsaw ghetto or South Africa, this was a system of segregation that ensured through acts of violence and the law that these groups of people, these “racial types” within quotes could not be in any other place.

They were restricted to that place. apartheid as you know actually means to separate. So, you separated them, you segregated them and you segregated them so that you could monitor where they are. You always knew where to find the blacks. The blacks would be in the black town, the Jews would be in the ghettos. So, what we are looking at here is and you can see from the New York Times the world's largest ghetto of the Soweto ghetto during apartheid reign in South Africa. So, what does the ghetto do? The ghetto like I said concentrates these people. But as we know during Nazi Germany, during the Nazi occupation of Europe, it was not enough to merely segregate them. After a point, it was not seen as enough to control the Jewish people. You needed to exterminate them and that is how during the Wannsee conference, they evolved what was called the Final Solution and this is the most extreme example of a biopolitics based on race.

Here is an excerpt from the Wannsee conference and the document which came out of it called the final solution to the Jewish question. And it says, “during the course of the Final Solution, the Jews will be deployed under appropriate supervision at a suitable form of labor deployment in the East. In large labor columns separated by gender, able-bodied Jews will be brought to those regions to build roads whereby a large number will doubtlessly be lost through natural reduction”. It's important to pay attention to the language here, okay? “A large number will doubtlessly be lost through natural reduction. Any final remnant that survives will doubtless consist of elements most capable of resistance. They must be dealt with appropriately since representing the fruit of natural selection, they are to be regarded as the core of a new Jewish revival”. What is the

statement, this document doing? The document is cautioning against the rise of the revival of Jews and they must be dealt with.

When you transport them, it says, this document says to large labor columns and ask them to do severe, serious labor. Several will be naturally dying from natural reduction because they will not be able to co-exist with that labor. But there will be some able-bodied Jews, they will survive and you have to be very careful with them. Why? You have to be careful because they might produce, be the source of a Jewish revival. What is the statement doing? The statement is making a certain kind of potential threat visible. What if the Jews arrive? What if the Jews come together and offer resistance to Nazi Germany's dictatorial regime? So, what you do is, as a final solution, you take all these Jews and put them somewhere in the East, put them to a lot of hardship, hard labor, where by natural selection and natural reduction, several of them will die. Now is this natural selection? Actually, the word "natural" is being used in an instance of savage irony.

It's not natural selection. What the document says is, over a period of time when subject to such impossible living conditions, impossible working conditions, many of these people will die. Is it natural? No, it's not. You create the conditions for them to work under terrible, terrible duress, stress and physical discomfort. Like I mentioned in the last few minutes and the previous lesson, bad food, no food, not adequate shelter and clothing during the European winters, which are very severe and very hard physical labor. People will die. People will fall ill. And we know that in the concentration camps, typhoid and cholera were rampant. Their clothes were full of vermin and they died of several diseases. Now you will say disease is natural. No, not quite. What the ghettos, what the concentration camps did is to create conditions in which healthy living was impossible.

That healthy living was out of the question. So, people would die. And there was a natural reduction. Look at what that statement says. In large labor columns, I'm reading it again, "in large labor columns separated by gender, able-bodied Jews will be brought to those regions to build roads, whereby a large number will doubtlessly be lost, doubtlessly be lost through natural reduction". As an extreme example of the biopolitics based on race, the final solution was actually gesturing at not natural, not natural at all, but a particularly evil, particularly wicked method of erasing large populations. We know that in the Holocaust, 6 million people, Jews died. In the Holodomor, that is the Ukrainian famine during Stalinist rule, 6 million Ukrainians died because their food stocks, the crops were taken away by Stalinist Russia and no food was delivered. The 6 million Ukrainians died actually of starvation.

So you let them die. So, is that natural reduction? Yes, in one sense it is natural because if you don't eat food, you naturally become weak and eventually you will die. So, in the

purest theoretical sense, it is natural death. You didn't eat, you died. But it's not natural at all because you are prevented from having access to food or medicine or whatever it might be. You were put in a situation where food was not available, where medical care was not available. So how is your death natural at all? That is biopolitics. Biopolitics here is supposedly enabling natural reduction of populations when it's not natural at all. It is a very gruesome, very cruel, very calculated method of decimating populations.

Contemporary studies show that, for example, the law enforcement systems in USA and Europe clearly demonstrate a racial biopolitics. Statistical reports and other studies, humanitarian and other reports show us that there are more African Americans, Blacks who are arrested and imprisoned than any other race in the United States. Then of course, the Muslim and Black races are the subject of higher securitization, preemption and disposability as the contemporary critic, Nijjar has pointed to. Which means to say vulnerable populations who are already on the margins of society, of the social order are subject to greater and further restrictions, greater and further limitations and subject to more and more oppressive power, power and power systems. Here for example, is an image from 1994 and this is in the wake of the Rwandan massacre and the refugee camp is in present day Congo, Kinshasa and what you can see are tents and if you look at the photograph, this is acre after acre of camps. Theoretically speaking, refugee camps are temporary, the camp is supposed to be temporary. But if you follow any of these reports and coverage, you will know that the residents are in camps for several years at a time.

Now the camp is also supposed to have a minimum standard of living that they should have minimum education facilities, medicine and medical services, proper hygiene and security should be present. But if you follow any of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees documentation or Amnesty International documentation, you will know that nothing of the sort is actually available. They live in the filthiest of conditions. There is practically no safe drinking water or security. So we have moved from ghettos to refugee camps.

The final set of examples come from immigration policies which are also built around a biopolitics, a racial biopolitics. And as studies show, certain categories of immigrants find it more and more difficult to get clearance into the US system. Mexicans, Muslims, women, they are interrogated more, they are subject to more checks and even after immigrant status is granted, even after immigrant status is granted, they remain subject to surveillance. Because they are seen as potentially threatening and disruptive of the United States or in extreme cases, they are abandoned for years, years and years to refugee camps or rehabilitation camps. Basically, because these are seen as threatening to the receiving society and these are seen as people who need to be controlled, monitored and observed basically, biopolitics again.

And this time biopolitics as always is hinged upon, is based upon their racial identity. So, Muslims who are from Arabia and other places, Syria and other places, African Americans, refugees from African nations are subject to greater immigration checks and even after their immigrant status has been granted, they are subject to more and more surveillance. So, they are seen as potentially disruptive as contemporary studies which are cited there as shown. Bringing it up to the contemporary in the globalized world, how does biopolitics or biopower continue? How does it manifest? There are four very clear examples of how biopower operates today.

The international regimes regulate labor movement and labor force. There are greater heightened measures of surveillance and security systems. There are also welfare and humanitarian systems and then there are public health regulations. I have cited only four, there are others also but the regulation of the labor force which should be about say the kind of visas that are issued, the kind of requirements, minimum eligibility requirements of who is eligible or entitled to visas is always changing. They are placed under surveillance; greater security is placed upon them. Humanitarian systems are also in place whereby Doctors Without Borders and educational services are being offered but that is also based upon as we have seen in the case of say the Wordsworth or the Dickens excerpts, only when they are under control, only when they are grouped together and under surveillance can they be given welfare and humanitarian aid.

Then of course there are the public health orders and regulations which also hinge upon a biopolitics. Now these are contemporary instances. As you can see, we have moved from extreme cases of biopolitics which would be the extermination camps of Nazi Germany and we looked at the Wannsee Declaration and the Final Solution document. We have moved through refugees to this condition of contemporary, of the contemporary era where biopolitics operates through multiple means at multiple levels. That's all for now. Soon, again.