

Focus Essay

REVIEW OF HUMAN RIGHTS
Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 2020, lxxv-lxxiii
DOI: 10.35994/rhr.v6i1.157



Žižek, Agamben and the Idea of Democratic Biopolitics

Shehzad Ali

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2988-5231>

Abstract:

Following the debate between Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek in response to the pandemic, this essay explores that the concept of 'democratic biopolitics' is a viable alternative to the concept of 'populist biopolitics'. The concept problematizes the dominant intellectual sense of the pandemic (whether it is a rupture or event) by rendering that 'heeding to the aspirations of ordinary citizens' is the key to understanding the pandemic. It also double-downs on the idea of Sotiris and Schubert that a community based democratic response to the pandemic should be pursued.

Key words: democratic biopolitics, event, pandemic, positions, populist biopolitics, rupture.

The politics of pandemic has developed multiple scenarios and complex layers on the front of neoliberal corporate state. While responding to the intensity and fear of the pandemic there emerged a binary thinking of either supporting the lockdowns or completely negating them. The essay is an attempt to think with the political theorists who are trying to understand this pandemic by reconfiguring the political dynamics involved in response to it and by

Shehzad Ali is Shehzad Ali is a visiting lecturer and an MPhil candidate in political science at the University of Peshawar. Email: shehzadkp1992@gmail.com

Published Online: January 18, 2021.

ISSN (Print): 2520-7024; ISSN (Online): 2520-7032.

<https://reviewhumanrights.com>



observing its implications on the civil and democratic life of citizens. To make sense of the situation and pinpoint the problematic aspects of the pandemic, two of the world renowned public intellectuals namely; Philosopher Slavoj Žižek and Philosopher Giorgio Agamben have seemingly developed an argumentation which has attracted the interest of academia. The former supporting the lockdown measures in order to curb the intensity of the pandemic while the latter completely rejected these measures by calling them oppressive and fear-oriented.¹

Žižek with his prolific tools of psychoanalysis considers such kind of resistance to the lockdowns as nothing but sheer madness.² More specifically, for Žižek the entire phenomena of protests against the lockdowns is nested inside the motivation to return to the normal which is, in his Lacanian sense, a sign of collective madness.³ One may consider Agamben's position as extreme and irrational, however, his understanding of the pandemic is deeply rooted in the way societies have been transformed in the past by diseases like this.⁴ His argument is based on the idea that the government in Italy and around the world has been developing these measures to curb civil liberties and fundamental human dignity on the pretext of an enforced 'state of exception' (based on the state of emergency). The recent cases of abusive constitutionalism in Southeast Asia⁵ (Philippine, Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar⁶) provide an ample evidence of why Agamben is anxious about the lockdown measures. Meanwhile it is also intriguing to think that if the state of emergency is a pretext for authoritarianism, then why the most authoritarian-populist leaders such as President Trump and Bolsonaro did not utilize it for their own malevolent purposes? And quite contrary to the predictions of Agamben, the former started blaming China while the latter utterly denied the pandemic calling it just a 'little cold' and a 'little flu'.⁷ So, what is lacking in the above polemical positions taken by Žižek and Agamben? And why is it hard to properly conceptualize this pandemic? One possible answer is that it is fairly complicated to proceed properly because there is a myriad of issues escorting the pandemic or may be one can say that the pandemic is a culmination the ongoing catastrophes (as Žižek would also argue). But we will come to the problem of conceptualization in the coming sections.

In addition, it is also complex to define whether the current pandemic is a 'rupture' or 'event', since, a theoretical conceptualization of this pandemic leaves us with a variety of responses. So, theoreticians such as Ryan Engley and Todd McGowan would describe this pandemic as a kind of 'rupture' or 'event'.⁸ Though, in the standard definition of 'event' as coined by Alain Badiou, he might not call it an 'event', because for him a natural calamity is not an event. However, in a recent discussion on 'political events', Badiou says, "For me, an event is something that brings to light a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable. An event is not by itself the creation of a reality; it is the creation of a possibility, it opens up a possibility. It indicates to us that a possibility exists that has been ignored."⁹ And interestingly this definition perfectly encapsulates the current pandemic as an event, since it has the ability to create the possibility of things that were previously held impossible.¹⁰ So far as the term of 'rupture' is concerned, Todd McGowan has argued that it is also a 'rupture' because it has completely transformed the socio-economic and political landscape of the entire globe.¹¹ However, a counter and new explanation has been adopted by Raza Saeed, who pessimistically maintains, "there is nothing novel in our response to the virus as we have repeated, and as we were bound to repeat, the same tropes and trends that were there in our limited arsenal. Covid-19 then is more of an acceleration than a rupture – it is forcing us to race towards the destination which we have been inching towards in the last few decades."¹² Saeed's argument of acceleration(ism) is quite similar to the idea developed by Agamben in the sense that this pandemic is pushing the democratic structure of society towards a new kind of biopolitical arena which is unable to offer any historical change that favors the people (seems quite contrary to the definition offered on Rupture and Event by Todd McGowan).¹³

If we follow Saeed's argument, it leaves us with a questions and that is, whether the new biopolitical arena is a hopeless frontier for the people? And if McGowan is right in describing that this is an event, then it might be asked that what are the new possibilities created by this pandemic? These are the questions which I would like to return to in the last section. But prior to that, it is important to think about the current pandemic from a different perspective, and it might help us in determining the problem in our basic

conceptualization. It is based on an explanation offered by Boaventura de Sousa Santos. While deciphering the concealed meaning of the coronavirus, he argues that the virus is an allegory of the three godly unicorns. He says, "The literal meaning of the coronavirus pandemic is widespread chaotic fear and boundless death caused by an invisible enemy, but in fact it says a lot more than that. Here are some of the meanings contained in it. The invisible almighty can be the infinitely large (the god of the religions of the book), or it can be the infinitely small (the virus). Another invisible all powerful being, neither large nor small, for it is misshapen, has emerged in recent times: the markets. Like the virus, it mutates in insidious and unpredictable ways, and, like god (Holy Trinity, incarnations), it is at once one and multiple. Although singular, it expresses itself in the plural. Unlike god, markets *is* omnipresent in this world and not in the hereafter, and, unlike the virus, it is a blessing for the powerful and a curse for all the rest (the overwhelming majority of humans and the whole of non-human life). Although omnipresent, all these invisible beings fit in their own specific space: virus in bodies, god in temples, markets in stock exchanges. Outside of these spaces, the human being is a transcendental homeless being."¹⁴ He further elaborates that the pandemic discloses the current mode of the world which is ruled by the three unicorns; namely capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. For them to rule effectively, they have to rule in an intemperate, ferocious and uncontrollable way like the virus. And they also maintain their existences in an invisible way just like their invisible nexus. The invisible mode of these unicorns is permeated through education and permanent indoctrination to the extent that they seem as 'common sense'. However, there is an inherent paradox in this way of thinking which is, on the one side it says, "all human beings are equal (so say capitalism); but given that there exist natural differences between them, equality between inferiors cannot be the same as equality between superiors (so say colonialism and patriarchy)."¹⁵

Meanwhile he revisits the positions espoused by Žižek and Agamben and concludes by saying, "The time of vanguard intellectuals is over. Intellectuals must see themselves as rearguard intellectuals, must heed the needs and aspirations of ordinary citizens and find out how to use that as a foundation for their

theories. Otherwise, citizens will be defenseless before those who alone can speak their language and understand their deep concerns. In many countries these would be the conservative evangelical pastors or the radical Muslim imams, who stand for capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal domination.”¹⁶ What makes Santos argument interesting is the phrase that the intellectual “must heed the needs and aspirations of ordinary citizens” and interestingly that is the key to unlock the whole enigma of pandemic.

Now comes the point where we should reflect on Saeed and McGowan’s positions, and it takes us to another layer of argument among Panagiotis Sotiris, Bryan Doniger and Karsten Schubert on the democratic biopolitics or biopolitics from below. While questioning Agamben’s position on lockdowns and social distancing, Panagiotis Sotiris revisit Foucault’s notion of the care of the self along with *parrhesia* (the courage for truth) and asks that is there any possibility that we follow the measures of lockdowns and social distancing and at the same time remain immune to the oppressive biopolitics of the neoliberal state. In his words, “Is it possible to have collective practices that actually help the health of populations, including largescale behavior modifications, without a parallel expansion of forms of coercion and surveillance?”¹⁷ While responding to this question he develops the idea of “democratic biopolitics” or “biopolitics from below”. However, this term of democracy in biopolitics is something which is troublesome, since democracy in the neoliberal states around the world has already been claiming to have accomplished the will of the people (in a celebratory way). Therefore it does not make sense to legitimize biopolitics in a neoliberal democracy, it is a plea for legitimizing authoritarian biopolitics. This is the pushback offered by Bryan Doniger in response to the Sotiris proposal. As he says, “the existence of democratic biopolitics means that a ‘free and responsible’ people work to legitimize biopolitics every day, even those of us who are ostensibly ‘anti-racist,’ or ‘communist,’ or ‘socialist.’ We compete daily in a free market, we vote or opt not to vote in democratic elections, and we make rational choices to buy the consumer products that suit our interests. In turn, these practices ensure a thriving economy, which, according to the logic of neoliberalism, is sufficient proof that we have freely, collectively, and rationally consented to be governed. For as long as we have endured

neoliberalism, we have also endured democratic biopolitics. Furthermore, democratic biopolitics has not been emancipatory; to the contrary, it is hell on earth.”¹⁸

In order to clarify his position, Sotiris corresponded with the critique of Doniger but offered an insightful corrective that Foucault’s conceptualization of biopolitics is very dynamic and relational and therefore one should be very careful to pay attention to such notions. He argues that Foucault moved on to discuss the relationship of truth and power and recognized we should look out for alternatives (a constant search for *heterotopias*). So there is no doubt that biopolitics and biopower are modality of power but “they also points toward the formation of a new terrain of antagonisms and struggles and the possibility of a form of biopolitics antagonistic to both the paradigm of sovereignty and the paradigm of the market and political economy and conditioned by the force of subaltern struggles.”¹⁹ Sotiris’s position is quite interesting and indicates a new horizon for making sense of the politics of pandemic. Though, it not the same position as the one developed by Žižek who in his early work admired the Chinese authoritarian way of dealing with pandemic.²⁰ On the contrary, a community based position wherein one can take care of the self along with the whole community. By deploying a democratic biopolitics, it might be ‘the possibility’ that this event (in Badiou’s latter definition adopted by Todd McGowan) has created and it is also a theoretical response to Raza Saeed’s position on the continuity of the familiar.

Finally I would like to incorporate Karsten Schubert view who also upholds the idea that democratic biopolitics is the only responsible alternative to the ‘populist biopolitics’²¹(as has emerged in various countries around the globe).²² He also does not like the singular characterizations of Foucault’s notion of biopolitics as it has been clear from the position of Agamben. Furthermore, Schubert in his think-piece is careful to attend the notion that there is a possibility of democratic biopolitics that can go wrong and degenerate into populist biopolitics, therefore, he argues, it is necessary to provide strong institutional grounds to such kind of political initiative.

To conclude, this pandemic is an historical event which can be used to initiate a pluralistic democratic response to the current neoliberal state. Moreover, it makes us cognizant to the fact that our

political system is based on an oppressive biopolitical process. Therefore, there is a need of an appropriate theoretical response to problematize the structural pathologies that are embedded in its core. And it also gives us an opportunity to incorporate alternative epistemological tools by making them appropriate with the aspirations of ordinary citizens.

Acknowledgment:

The essay would not have been possible without my online seminar class on *Political Transformation and Governmentality in Times of a Global Pandemic in Transregional Perspective* with PD Dr. Andrea Fleschenberg.

Notes:

¹ Kotsko, 'Giorgio Agamben', PrNeix, *Interview with Giorgio Agamben, August 2020*.

² Žižek, *PANDEMIC! 2*.

³ Ibid., 110. The idea is that pandemic has put the world outside the 'normality' on the verge of a new unimaginable and impossible change. He argues that this event should be used to change the current malaise of capitalist normality. This is why he refers to the movie "Escape (2017)" to be understood as the perfect reflection of current situation.

⁴ Saeed, 'Covid-19 and the Continuity of the Familiar'.

⁵ Dressel, 'COVID-19 and Abusive Constitutionalism in Southeast Asia'.

⁶ The case of Myanmar is quite scary and implies a very dangerous precedent by the government. See Anonymous, 'COVID-19 Gives Cover for Threats to Freedom of Information and Expression in Myanmar'.

⁷ Lasco, 'Medical Populism and the COVID-19 Pandemic'.

⁸ Engley and McGowan, 'Coronavirus and Its Discontents'.

⁹ Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, 9.

¹⁰ Engley and McGowan, 'Coronavirus and Its Discontents'.

¹¹ Ibid., whether the transformation is in favour of the people is a contestable claim and therefore it is necessary to define the term. So as Paul Eisenstein and Todd McGowan define the term they say, "Rupture occurs at moments of revolutionary historical change, but it is not just revolution: it is also the interruption of the flow of social life whose force remains in the wake of revolutionary changes. The political impact of rupture does not disappear when its obvious manifestation cease to be prominently visible. A Rupture occurs when the coordinates that organize existence undergo a shift, such as when culture emerges out of the natural order." See, Eisenstein and McGowan, *Rupture*.

¹² Saeed, 'Covid-19 and the Continuity of the Familiar'.

¹³ Engley and McGowan, 'Coronavirus and Its Discontents'.

¹⁴ Santos, 'The Tragic Transparency of the Virus'.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Sotiris, 'Against Agamben'.

¹⁸ Doniger, 'Two Problems with Democratic Biopolitics (Critique in Times of Coronavirus)'. His second critique is on the terminology of biopolitics which he describes as different from Anatomopolitics, a crucial distinction made by Foucault; the former demonstrates the techniques to secure the health of the race or species, while the latter describes the technique to directly act on the human body (meaning the politics of the human body) such as the psychiatric institutions.

¹⁹ Sotiris, 'Democratic Biopolitics Revisited'.

²⁰ Žižek, *PANDEMIC!*, 10, 11, 12.

²¹ Schubert defines populist biopolitics in the following way, "as populism is a degeneration of democracy, populist biopolitics is a degeneration of democratic biopolitics. It is a repressive and paternalistic form of democratic biopolitics, i.e. when members of the community and not the state engage in biopolitics that limits freedom and normalizes others. Populist biopolitics occurs both online and offline when members of the community shame each other for supposedly irrational and unsolidaristic behavior such as, for example, leaving the house or meeting with friends, encapsulated in #staythefuckathome. Populist biopolitics also occurs in more formal political discourse, when the state is pressured to enact stricter regulations on the population. Populist biopolitics is mostly visible in countries where state repression is comparatively low, such as Germany." For details, see, Schubert, 'Crying for Repression'.

²² Ibid.

References

- Anonymous. 'COVID-19 Gives Cover for Threats to Freedom of Information and Expression in Myanmar'. *New Mandala*, 9 April 2020. <https://www.newmandala.org/covid-19-gives-cover-for-threats-to-freedom-of-information-and-expression-in-myanmar/>.
- Badiou, Alain. *Philosophy and the Event*. Wiley, 2013.
- Doniger, Bryan. 'Two Problems with Democratic Biopolitics (Critique in Times of Coronavirus)'. *Critical Legal Thinking*, 28 April 2020. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/04/28/two-problems-with-democratic-biopolitics-critique-in-times-of-coronavirus/>.
- Dressel, Björn. 'COVID-19 and Abusive Constitutionalism in Southeast Asia: Where Are the Courts?' *New Mandala*, 9 July 2020. <https://www.newmandala.org/covid-19-and-abusive-constitutionalism/>.
- Eisenstein, Paul, and Todd McGowan. *Rupture: On the Emergence of the Political*. Northwestern University Press, 2012.
- Engley, Ryan, and Todd McGowan. 'Coronavirus and Its Discontents'. Accessed 14 January 2021. <https://soundcloud.com/whytheory/coronavirus-and-its-discontents>.
- Kotsko, ~ Adam. 'Giorgio Agamben: "Clarifications"'. *An Und Für Sich*, 17 March 2020. <https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/>.

-
- Lasco, Gideon. 'Medical Populism and the COVID-19 Pandemic'. *Global Public Health* 15, no. 10 (2 October 2020): 1417–29. doi:10.1080/17441692.2020.1807581.
- PrNeix. "Interview with Giorgio Agamben." YouTube video, 5:57. [August, 2020]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=867_5upU55o.
- Saeed, Raza. 'Covid-19 and the Continuity of the Familiar'. *Critical Legal Thinking*, 21 March 2020. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/21/covid-19-and-the-continuity-of-the-familiar/>.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 'The Tragic Transparency of the Virus'. *Critical Legal Thinking*, 6 April 2020. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/04/06/the-tragic-transparency-of-the-virus/>.
- Schubert, Karsten. 'Crying for Repression: Populist and Democratic Biopolitics in Times of COVID-19.' *Critical Legal Thinking*, 1 April 2020. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/04/01/crying-for-repression-populist-and-democratic-biopolitics-in-times-of-covid-19/>.
- Sotiris, Panagiotis. 'Against Agamben: Is a Democratic Biopolitics Possible?' *Critical Legal Thinking*, 14 March 2020. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/03/14/against-agamben-is-a-democratic-biopolitics-possible/>.
- . 'Democratic Biopolitics Revisited: A Response to a Critique'. *Critical Legal Thinking*, 25 May 2020. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2020/05/25/democratic-biopolitics-revisited-a-response-to-a-critique/>.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *PANDEMIC! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost*. New York and London: OR Books, 2020. <https://www.orbooks.com/catalog/pandemic-2/>.
- . *PANDEMIC!: Covid-19 Shakes the World*. New York and London, 2020. <https://www.orbooks.com/catalog/pandemic/>.