

Witnessing the Pandemic With Foucault: Power, Politics, and COVID-19

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Abstract

Drawing heavily on the works of Michel Foucault, I examine the different political responses to the pandemic of COVID-19. In the first part of this article, I examine the Chinese government's response to COVID-19 and expose the relationship between biopower and the political ideal of societies, arguing that technology also entered into the realm of biopolitics and helped society accomplish its political ideal of mobility, productivity, and security. In the second part of this article, I suggest that COVID-19 reshaped and rearranged the power mechanism in societies, arguing that new forms of power might emerge in the future. Synthesizing these two cases, I challenge the reader to reflect critically upon the relationship between the pandemic and the power architecture of societies and suggest that the pandemic might lead to the emergence of new power relations in societies.

Key words: Social and political philosophy; Michel foucault; Biopower; Covid-19

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INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the global response to the Corona crisis provided us an opportunity to reflect, experience, and witness what Foucault calls the techniques of social control. For example, the Chinese government has placed Wuhan

under a lockdown, which is strikingly resonant with Foucault's essay "Panopticism" in *Discipline and Punish*. And recently, the Chinese government's implementation of color code to control the spread of COVID-19 also echoes Foucault's biopower. The Foucauldian examination of the various responses across the world enables us to revisit Foucault's philosophy and reflect upon the dynamics between societies and the pandemic of COVID-19.

Before entering into my analysis, I would like to offer a brief overview of Foucault's philosophy and critical terms to understand Foucault. As Foucault argues, since the seventeenth and eighteenth century, a new form of power relation emerged to replace the sovereign power relations in Europe: the disciplinary power. It was a nonviolent technique used by states to control and discipline individuals. Eventually, individuals internalized this disciplinary power and learned to behave in orderly ways. In his later works, Foucault argues that there was a shift in the use of power relations from the maintenance of authority and control toward the maintenance and control of the population: biopower. Instead of aiming at social control, biopower focused on the population's life, nutrition, economic activity, productivity, health, etc. In other words, biopower's central task is to maintain the health of the population and eliminate the damaging elements such as diseases. In short, the goal of the biopower and its political manifestation through the control of the population orient toward the well-being of the population.

It is necessary to note that Foucault's biopower and biopolitics also underline the fundamental principle of society. In biopolitics, the health of society and the health of bodies fuse into one; thus, the interest of society is indispensable from the health of individuals. The underlying rationality of biopower is to cultivate the life of the population. (Hannah, Hutta, & Schemann, 2020, p.5) By pursuing this project, societies could maximize their productivity, mobility, and security, thereby achieving

their political ideal.¹

The structure of this article consists of two parts. Each part will be devoted to present and analyze a type of power from Foucault's philosophy. The first part of this article, "The Politics of Technology," analyzes the Chinese government's response to the Corona crisis. Examining the interplay between politics and technology, I first deny the neutrality of technology and argue that technology often serves as a political tactic to maximize and optimize social mobility, social productivity, and the security of the population. Then, I demonstrate that this medical technology is essentially a type of biopower, which has been largely neglected by philosophers and political scientists. The second part of my essay, "Women, Gender Dynamics, and Social Reproduction," examines women's social and domestic lives during this period. I argue that the pandemic of COVID-19 disrupted the disciplinary architecture of disciplinary societies, leading to the collapse of the disciplinary societies and the reappearance of patriarchal societies.

THE POLITICS OF TECHNOLOGY

In Wuhan, China, the diagnosis and control of the infected patients through Nucleic Acid Testing (NAT) were rendered less effective due to the surge in the number of the Coronavirus patients; three factors led to the emergence of this new phenomenon: the resource factor, the technical factor, and the institutional factor. First, there were only three companies that qualified to produce the testing kits for NAT, but they could not sufficiently meet the demands of the testing kits in Wuhan, and subsequently, the hospitals were unable to diagnose the patients. (Luo, 2020) Second, the operation of the Nucleic Acid Testing has its technical demands: it required people with expertise to do the samplings of NAT; however, many hospitals in Wuhan lacked people with this expertise, so NAT could not diagnose patients effectively in Wuhan. (Qin, Liao, & Li, 2020) Third, the operation of NAT can be conducted only in certified institutions with specific equipment and a clean environment, so with a limited daily capacity to run the tests, the diagnosis and control of COVID-19, in turn, became less effective. (Li et al, 2020) The pandemic exposed the scarcity of medical resources and posed a challenge to the social body.

¹ By political ideal, I mean the underlying political rationality in modern states; specifically, this rationality refers to society's natural tendency to attain and maximize its mobility, productivity, and security -- in short, a kind of economic rationality. In the rest of this paper, the term "political ideal" always refers to this type of rationality. Moreover, this rationality is resonant with Foucault's concept of power, for Foucault's analysis of biopower often more or less underpins this type of rationality. See, for instance, Michel Foucault's "Right of Death and Power over Life" from *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* or Michel Foucault's *Society Must Be Defended*.

To respond to this challenge, the Chinese government loosened the diagnostic criteria for the Coronavirus, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the control of COVID-19. On February 8, the Chinese government urged the administration in Wuhan to diagnose every patient as soon as possible and "leave no patients unattended," aiming to prevent further infection of COVID-19. (Sun, 2020) Subsequently, the government issued another edition of the National Treatment and Diagnosis Plan to aid this aim, defining "the diagnosis of viral pneumonia based on radiologic features by radiologists as one of the diagnostic criteria for COVID-19." (Li and Xia, 2019, p.2) By reducing the standard testing process of NAT to CT scans, the Chinese government enabled hospitals to diagnose patients more efficiently, increasing the diagnosis and control of COVID-19. Within several days, the cases of COVID-19 rapidly surged by 45% to nearly 50,000 due to CT scans. (Bloomberg, 2020)

As I have shown above, the Chinese government lowered its testing standard for COVID-19 to remedy Wuhan's ineffective disease control. This case provided us a channel to answer one of the classic and controversial problems in the philosophy of technology: Is technology independent of politics? The answer is no. Politics and technology are closely related. Technology always accommodates the political ideal to maximize society's mobility, productivity, and security. In other words, the ultimate end of technology is to increase social mobility, productivity, and security to the fullest extent. The production of technology, thus, is toward helping society and individuals transcend the spatial limits of the world.

Some people might hold that technology is neutral, arguing that since technology is itself neutral, it can be applied in good or evil ways. This objection simply ignores the meaning of technology, reducing technology to its rudimentary physical form. If technology is neutral, then what is the difference between an object like a stone and a smartphone? Is the technology also independent of the intentions of its creator? And how is it possible for humans to create an artifact that is free from human values? It is impossible to do so. However, technology can have "a range of flexibility in the dimensions of their material form," and this flexibility allows technology to be applied in good or evil ways (Winner, 2020, p.134). Thus, the proponents of the neutrality of technology confuse the concepts of flexibility with neutrality, and they are actually arguing for the flexibility of technology rather than the neutrality of technology. In short, technology can be flexible, but it is never autonomous and independent of political ideals, ideologies, or human values.

And when a product of *technology* fails to fulfill the expectation of society-- namely, to maximize the political ideal-- it would be immediately replaced by another technology. In the case of Wuhan, NAT kits failed to perform the political ideal for technology to maximize

society's mobility, productivity, and security due to the scarcity of NAT kits. To better achieve its political ideal, the Chinese government reduced the testing standard for COVID-19 by replacing NAT standard with CT standard. The change in the testing standard increased the mobility and productivity of society, allowing social institutions to effectively curb the rapid transmission of COVID-19 and securing the safety of the population. The interaction between technology and politics, the technology's function to attain the social and political ideal, and the technology's value-oriented and instrumental nature can be best summarized in Emmanuel Mesthene's definition of technology. As Mesthene writes,

"We define technology as the organization of knowledge for the achievement of practical purposes. It is in this broader meaning that we can best see the extent and variety of the effects of technology on our institutions and values [...] This quality of finality of modern technology, and the degree to which our time is oriented toward and dependent on science and knowledge, have brought our society, more than any before, to explicit awareness of technology as an important determinant of our lives and institutions. As a result, our society is coming to a deliberate decision to understand and control technology, and is therefore devoting significant effort to the search for ways to measure the full range of its impacts." (Mesthene, 1970, pp. 25-26)

Mesthene's account of technology captures the essence of technology in modern society. The invention and adaptation of technology are never independent of the social-historical context; that is, technology is developed, adapted, and evolved in accordance with the historical, economic, and political development of society. A close examination of the effect of this response would further explicate the relationship between political ideals and technology; in the next section, I will illustrate this relationship and suggest that technology could be a form of biopower.

A statistical analysis of the Chinese government's response illustrates the government's attempt to prevent the spread of the disease. In diagnostic testing for COVID-19, the null hypothesis would be the following statement: the infected population's testing result suggests that the Coronavirus does not infect the population. When the Chinese government used NAT testing standard, it failed the null hypothesis, thereby committing type II error; that is, while the testing result accurately suggests that the tested patients are infected by COVID-19 (true positive), this testing standard could not cover the entire population in Wuhan due to the scarcity of NAT testing kits, so this approach was ineffective in preventing the spread of COVID-19. On the other hand, when the Chinese government changed the testing standard from NAT standard to CT standard, it rejected the null hypothesis and thus committed type I error; that is, the CT testing standard allowed the Chinese government to detect all the patients with the symptom of COVID-19, even

though some patients were not infected by COVID-19 (false positive). Although the CT testing standard would misdiagnose some patients, it allowed the Chinese government to detect and provide treatments to all the Coronavirus patients, so it could efficiently prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Essentially, the Chinese government's strategy was a type of biopower that enabled itself to protect the life of society and the population. The CT scan would misdiagnose some patients, but this approach would minimize the impact of the pandemic on society and allow the government to curb the spread of the disease. The Chinese government's response was resonant with what Foucault calls "biopolitics of the population." (Foucault, 1978, p.139) In this political mechanism, the government would curb and control the spread of the pandemic through regulatory measures toward the population. Indeed, technology was a type of biopower that enabled the government to minimize the impact of this pandemic on society. With the rapid economic and scientific development, Foucault's biopower is not only limited to mere biological control of the population through "births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity." (Ibid) Technology also entered into this mechanism of power; it helped the state to intervene, regulate, and control the population more efficiently. In short, technology is also a new type of biopower that enables the state to intervene, control, and regulate it.

WOMEN, GENDER DYNAMICS, AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The pandemic not only allowed us to witness the actual operations of biopower and biopolitical tactics but also allowed us to witness the collapse/decline of disciplinary societies. According to recent reports by the United Nations about the lives of women during the pandemic, COVID-19 generally increased domestic violence rates and the hours of unpaid care work women had to spend each day; furthermore, social apparatuses such as police could not engage in their disciplinary project due to the lockdown caused by the pandemic. Disabling the operation of social institutions and disciplinary power systems, COVID-19 led to the reappearance of patriarchy and male domination by reconfiguring and rearranging social structure, familial structure, and gender dynamics.

The widespread pandemic of COVID-19 restricted people from traveling to other places, so everyone had to stay at home. This increased physical contact among family members, and it put more economic pressure on each family. With the increase in physical contacts among family members (husband and wife) and the increase in economic pressure, the rate of domestic violence also soared to unprecedented levels. For example, in France, the reports of domestic violence have increased

by 30 % since the lockdown on March 17; in Cyprus and Singapore, the helplines have registered an increase in calls of 30% and 33%, respectively (UN Women Headquarters, 2020, p.2). In short, the pandemic of COVID-19 increased the rate of domestic violence in many families across the world.

Three factors led to this dramatic increase in the rate of domestic violence. First, the police were unable to intervene or stop the domestic violence, for the police were afraid of causing infection; furthermore, most police were occupied in maintaining social order during the pandemic. Second, female empowerment organizations were also unable to intervene in domestic violence during the pandemic, for the members of these organizations were either 1) afraid of causing infection or 2) were quarantined themselves at home. Third, women were unable to leave home due to COVID-19, so they could not escape from the fights with their husbands/families. With the presence of COVID-19, moreover, domestic violence also took a more complex form. For example, abusers used exposure to COVID-19 as a threat to women, widely exploiting the inability of women to call for help or escape, and threw women out on the street with nowhere to go (UN Women Headquarters, 2020, p.17). By limiting the spatial freedom of people and causing the dysfunction of social organizations and institutions, COVID-19 greatly disempowered women and reinforced the patriarchal structure in families.

We can see from here that societies' disciplinary power was defunct due to the pandemic of COVID-19. Social institutions -- in this context, police and female empowerment organizations -- could not exercise their disciplinary powers because cities were under lockdown. Under this situation, the policing force could not extend an "intermediary network, acting where they could not intervene, disciplining the non-disciplinary spaces." (Foucault, 1991, p.215) Therefore, COVID-19 reverted modern society to its most primitive form, causing a political and social atavism in the architecture of this power system. With the disappearance of this disciplinary system, the patriarchal structure emerged once again, and this emergence was manifested through the increasing male violence toward women.

However, COVID-19 not only led to the reappearance of patriarchy around the world but also reinforced the traditional role of women among families. When the children were out of school and stayed at home, women had to take care of their children, which led to imbalances in the gender distribution of unpaid care work. Statistically, women had to spend 4.1 hours per day on unpaid care work, but men only have to spend 1.7 hours per day on unpaid care work (UN Women Headquarters, 2020, p.14). As the data demonstrate, COVID-19 reinforced the traditional role of women and weakened the social position of women. COVID-19, thus, reshaped

the gender dynamics and reestablished patriarchal order in societies.

As the previous section suggests, the economic and social precarity caused by the pandemic rearranged the existing gender order in capitalist societies, thereby leading the increase in domestic violence. The pandemic of COVID-19 led to social dysfunction and lockdowns. As a result of it, many people lost their jobs and had to suffer financially; every family, therefore, had more economic burdens to bear. With the unfavorable economic circumstances and the increase in structural economic oppression, many men perceived their 'masculinity' to be threatened, for they lost their jobs and were unable to support their families. Moreover, many men also perceived women as "out of control," for the increase in physical contacts and economic pressure rendered family disputes almost inevitable. To regain their "masculinity" and their position in the family, therefore, men used violence as a technique of control against women, restructuring gender order and reclaiming their male dominance. Thus, COVID-19 led men to reclaim their control over women again. This, in turn, destroyed the balanced gender dynamics between men and women.

COVID-19 not only led to the destruction of the balanced gender dynamics but also increased the reproductive labor of women. By 'reproductive labor,' I mean that capitalist societies often assign women to unpaid, unrecognized domestic labor such as cooking, cleaning, and child care. Nancy Fraser explains the relationship between reproductive labor and capitalist system:

"Because capital avoids paying for this work to the extent that it can, while it treating money as the be-all and end-all, it relegates those who perform social-reproductive labor to a position of subordination -- not only to the owners of capital but also to those more advantaged waged workers who can offload responsibility for it onto others" (Adams, 2019, p.22)

During the pandemic, the children were out of school and stayed at home, and women had to take care of their children, leading to imbalances in the gender distribution of unpaid care work. Statistically, women had to spend 4.1 hours per day on unpaid care work, but men only have to spend 1.7 hours per day on unpaid care work (United Nations, 2020, p.14). As the data suggest, COVID-19 increased the reproductive labor of women dramatically while men did not have to do anything at home. In conclusion, COVID-19 increased the reproductive labor of women and subjected women not only to the capitalist system's dominance but also to patriarchal oppression and male dominance.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have witnessed the basic operations of contemporary society's power mechanism: disciplinary

power and biopower. From the case of Wuhan, we can see the complex interplay between biopower and medical technology, the co-extensiveness between the social-historical context and technology, and the relationship between the political ideal of society and technology. In short, the case of Wuhan shows us how the state uses medical technology as a biopolitical tactic to curb the spread of COVID-19 and minimize the impact of COVID-19 on society.

In “Women, Gender Dynamics, and Social Reproduction,” we witnessed the collapse/decline of disciplinary societies and the reappearance of patriarchal structure in societies due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Although the lockdown prevented the spread of the pandemic, it led to the dysfunction of social institutions and organization, reverting societies to the rudimentary form of power mechanism -- a political/social atavism. Eventually, COVID-19 reshaped gender dynamics and subjected women under the oppressive control of capitalist societies and patriarchy.

In conclusion, the pandemic of COVID-19 disrupted, reshaped, and challenged the power mechanism of societies. Essentially, the various political responses -- the case of Wuhan and the case of women -- showed us the social body’s struggle to overcome this intrusive force. Society is not omnipotent, indeed; the Corona crisis reminded us that society could be challenged and even destroyed. In the society’s struggle over the pandemic, new forms of power might emerge, and the old types of power -- disciplinary power, for example -- might diminish. In the future, I believe there would emerge terms like “post-Corona” to indicate this changing process in the power mechanism. Perhaps, other forms of power might predominate in the power mechanism and shape our lives.

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