

Biopolitics, Biopsychology and Disabilities

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Abstract: *Biopolitics as being commonly known is the politics concerning with influencing environmental public policy and decision making. It is an intersectional field between human biology and politics. Biopolitics takes the administration of life and a locality population as its subject. To quote Michal Foucault, it is "to ensure, sustain and multiply life, to put this life in order". This term was coined by Rudolf Kjellen, a political scientist who also coined the term geopolitics in his 1905 two volumes work "The Great Powers". Kjellen sought to study "The Civil War between Social Groups" (comprising the state) from a biological perspective and thus named his putative discipline "biopolitics". In Kjellen's organism, a "super-individual creature". In contemporary US political science studies usage of the term is mostly divided between poststructuralist group using the meaning assigned by Michel Foucault (denoting social and political power over life) and another group which uses it to denote studies relating to biology and political science. The Nazis also used the term occasionally. For example, Hans Reiter used it in a 1934 speech to refer to their biologically based concept of nation and state and ultimately their racial policy. While the recent scholarship emerging out of the field of disability studies has sought to globalize the study of disability, this article addresses a series of conceptual gaps in current theorization about disability, globalization and practices of Empire. A number of leading scholars in the field of disability studies have pointed out the analytical limits of applying a western model of disability oppression to alternative contexts, but few have articulated the complex relationships between discourses of disability and able-bodiedness and contemporary forms of biopolitics.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The term "biopolitics" was first ushered into wide use in a variety of academic fields of inquiry by French theorist Michael Foucault during his lecture series "Society Must Be Defended", delivered at the College De France in the late 1970s. In a nutshell and simplified one at that for the purposes of the review; biopolitics refers to the overall control of citizens, bodies and state of being state apparatuses and the ways in which this control shows up

A bio political lens can be applied to a variety of current and political events that have to do with bodies, the state, and control, from US presidential candidate Donald Trump's fixation on building a wall between the US and Mexican borders to keep "illegal immigrants" out, to the recent panic in the US over the so-called "opiate epidemic" that (conveniently) leaves out the perspective of people with chronic pain who depend on opiate medications to have some semblance of a normal life, the effects positive and negative, of biopolitics are everywhere.

George Washington University Professor of English David T. Mitchell and his co-author Sharon Snyder convincingly and aptly examine the implications of 21st century, neoliberal biopolitics for the people with disabilities in their new book *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Able nationalism and Peripheral Embodiment*. The book's central thesis argues that Neoliberalism in the 21st century which, in Mitchell's words "invisibles Strategies of the seizure of the very materiality of life at the level of the individual", has made space for acceptance of certain kinds of disabled bodies, but this comes at the direct expense of other disabled and marginalized bodies.

II. DISCOURSES OF DISABILITY

Thinking in terms of discourses of disabilities helps open up critical space to theorize the gap between representations of disabilities and their physical manifestations. As so many disabled activists and scholars have noted, the experience of a disability is often far more influenced by cultural attitudes associated with disability than any physical consequences resulting from impairment. The gap between the personal experience of a disability and its larger cultural evaluation becomes even more complex when theorized in relation to other categories of difference, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. As Douglas Baynton (2001) explains, "disability has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves, but it has also done so for women and minority groups". When the language of disability is used to describe an entire population of non-disabled people in order to justify their exclusion from full political membership in a society, discourses of disability lose their connection to the physical body entirely. Far from articulating the complexity of an embodied state, such discourses rely on the negative cultural associations of disability to stigmatize diverse groups of people and deny them basic human rights. The fact that so many Western nations have relied upon discourses of disability to produce exceptions to their laws only shows how deeply related the concepts of able-bodiedness and citizenship are in the west.

III. DISABILITY OPPRESSION IN THE WEST

If discourses of disability have often been deployed historically to justify the social marginalization of all types of Minority groups in the West, this tendency presents a conventional problem for the field of disability studies. It asks Scholars to consider why disability, in particular, is considered such a convenient and natural marked social inferiority. The danger, of course, is to be read disability oppression as an evolutionary phenomenon, the inevitable result of the human desire for reproduction fitness. Once disability oppression is linked to human biology, it is divested of its political implications

In contrast, when discourses of disability are examined in relationship to the bio political aims of the state, even the earliest forms of biopolitics help reveal the tacit political connection between disability and social oppression and exclusion. When Aristotle writes that "human beings are born with regard to life, but exiting essentially with regard to the good life", he articulates the ancient Greek distinction between natural life and political life. (Agamben, 1995, page 2) Hannah Arendt (1958) elaborates on this division in *The Human Condition* when she distinguishes between Labour, work, and action, where Labour, or the animal laborers, "corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed in to the life process by labor. The human condition of Labour is life itself" (page 7). According to Arendt the ancient Greeks relegated Labor to the private sphere of the home while privileging the political and public life of action. For Agamben (1995) this distinction corresponds to the privileging of bios "the form or way of living proper to an individual or group", or zone, "simple fact of living common to all living beings" (page 1)

IV. DISABILITY AND BIOPOLITICS STUDIES

If disability has historically marked the exception to the Western political order, then this provides a slight nuance to the interpretation that many disability studies, Scholars have offered for the relevance of biopolitics to the study of disability, particularly in relation to the work of Michael Foucault. While Foucault is often cited as an important predecessor to the still growing field of disability studies, too often disability studies Scholars have sought to link Foucault's docile body, produced by modern technologies of discipline, to the disabled body. Tobin Siebers's (2008) discussions of Foucault's docile body, "the body invented by the modern age", is really just the disabled body in disguise (page 58). Siebers dismisses Foucault's post structural accounts of the body as part a larger argument that takes aim at social constructionist accounts of physical differences, suggesting that this type analysis inevitably seeks to return to a healthier, fitter, and more natural version of the body that processes, of signification have either blurred or substantially delimited.

Siebers's argument rests largely on a series of passages drawn from Foucault's (1979) *Discipline and Punish* two of which are;

"The soldier was someone who could be recognized from a far, he bore certain signs: the natural signs of his strength and his courage, the marks, too, of his pride; his body was the blazon of his strength and valor.

By the later eighteenth century the soldier has become something that can be made, out of formless clay, an inept body, the machine required can be constructed, posture is gradually corrected, a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable. (page 57-58).

The contrast presented by the depiction of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century soldier provides compelling evidence for Siebers's conclusion that Foucault's work romanticizes the health and fitness of a previous age. As a representative of this earlier type of fitness, the first soldier stands erected, the natural emblem of an internal strength of mind and body that marks his calling. The second soldier, on the other hand, appears to lack his strong sense of physicality: while his body suggests a latent potential, it must be trained, sculpted and adopted in order for that potential to be maximized. But Foucault (1979) is less concerned with the comparative physical merits of either soldier than the historical question of their verifiability as a soldier (page 135-36). In other words, Foucault is interested in what makes a soldier, and how that truth can be measured. In the first case, the soldier's identity is verifiable through his physical attributes, traits gifted at birth, natural affinities for running, jumping, marching and fighting.

For the second soldier, physical attributes are merely a raw material for a much more complex process of verification. This involves a training regimen and series of drills and learned behaviors, but also an accounting process, a series of measurements and a careful inventory of skills to ensure the effectiveness of that training. The problem with Siebers's critique is the suggestion that, despite Foucault's many claims to the contrary, his historical arguments are always implicitly evaluative, that he is nostalgic for a vision of the past.

In Siebers's (2008) argument, the docile body is the object of a profound form of repression, a reading that makes sense if "all of Foucault's major writings are dedicated to tracking their (madness, criminality and sexuality) involvement with social repression and exclusion" (page 57). But perhaps the most innovative aspect of Foucault's work is the theoretical move he makes away from the traditional juridico-institutional approach to the problem of power in order to imagine a form of power that is not simply repression but also productive. The concept of bio power allows Foucault to trace the many ways that power invests subjects at the level of the body, taking hold of all aspects of the life process. For Foucault, power is never simply a top-down affair, instead, it refers to a profoundly relational phenomenon. Even a cursory look at Foucault's work reveals that "repression" and "exclusion" do not occupy privileged spaces in his lexicon.

The fundamental difference between the two soldiers described above is that the second is object of this new form of bio power. According to Foucault, the charge of bio power is to take hold of human life in all its aspects, "right down to the depths of society" (Foucault, 1979 page 27). This type of power is invested in processes of economy and efficiency but also normalization, subjects begin to internalize the norms of population to the point where they police themselves, suturing their identities around the larger biopolitical aims of the state.

Foucault chooses to study the prison and the mental asylum because they are privileged sites from which to view the operation of power on the body of the subject, and it is significant to remember that the very idea of panopticism does not simply refer to Bentham's ideal prison but rather the prison as a perfect functioning of a mode of discipline that has invested the population at large. If Foucault (1979) looks to sites of exclusion for his analysis, it is in an effort to shed light on the contemporary norm, and this is precisely what he means when he argues that he is writing a "history of the present" (page 31)

The close relationship between biopower and able-bodiedness also suggests that able-bodiedness refers not simply to a privileged form of identity but more immediately to a regulatory discourse. As a regulatory discourse, able-bodiedness does not name a form of repression, but a form of subjectification and control. As discourses of able-bodiedness invest the population around a series of measurable and increasingly differentiable norms, individual subjects begin to model their behavior according to normative expectations.

In fact the conclusions can be drawn that despite divergences and uncertainties, that disability and able-bodiedness are the names two sides of the same biopolitical coin, but this is a point that requires Agamben's theory of sovereign power and bare life for further analysis.

V. DISABILITY AND MODERNITY: A NEW BIOPOLITICAL PARADIGM

Both Foucault and Arendt characterize modernity in precisely the same way, though they arrive at the conclusion separately: the threshold of modernity is constituted by politicization of the unqualified body, simply human life. For Arendt (1958), scientific modernity names the process by which labor the animal laborers, rises to central importance within the sphere of politics.

Foucault's (1990) analysis concurs, "For millennia man ...remained what he...was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man ...is an animal whose politics calls his...existence as a living being in to question (page 143). Once the animal laborers (agamben's zoe) is linked to the disabled body, disability becomes stigmatized in the West as a symbol of the strictly biological needs of the human body.

The conclusion might follow that if the project of modern biopolitics is invested primarily in the biological processes of its subjects, disability would find measure of inclusion in this new paradigm of rule. On the surface this appears to be the case, particularly with the deinstitutionalization movement and legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) that seeks to guarantee the civil rights of disabled populations.

Likewise, Davis (2002) has demonstrated the ways that disability finds inclusion as a market identity within the newly globalized economy. At the same time, there are dangers associated with this line of thought, which corresponds to a type of progress narrative associated with disabilities liberation. Even as the Old walls of the institution begin to crumble, the group home, the nursing home, the special education classroom, and the government funded facility continue to mark a point of separation between the able-bodied and the disabled.

From a global perspective, the inclusion of disabled subjects is also severely limited. In Achilles Mbembe's (2003) essay "Necropolitics" he offers the concept of a "death- World" to describe "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast population are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon the status of living dead" (page 40). Given that there are more than half billion disabled people in the world today and that 80 percent live in the developing countries, the intersections between impaired bodies and the creation of death words are multifarious (Davidson 2008, page 117). In such spaces, the visibly fragmented body marks a liminal position between life and death. While a social conditions conferred upon Mbembe's (2003) "living dead" produce disproportionate members of disabled people, their disabilities perform the symbolic work of justifying those unequal living conditions. The "death World" then relies on a form of circular logic that inverts its temporal manifestation, where acts of violence are justified by the disabilities they produce.

VI. CONCLUSION

The disabled/able-bodied binary has become more mobile in the contemporary moment, where the state, along with capitalist infrastructure, draws on disability rights discourses and inclusion efforts in order to furnish an image of multicultural benevolence and render invisible the process by which it disables other populations in alternative contexts. If discourses of disability have come to legitimate the state of exception, the logic of sovereignty has begun to inform the decisions of population at large, particularly at the time of personal or communal crisis.

Where Agamben's analysis falls short in its inability to adequately theorize the social stratification that make some groups of people more vulnerable to sovereign practices of violence than others. The process by which able bodied become disabled discursive is often inflected by other categories of difference, including race, gender, sexuality and particularly, class, Agamben (1995) writes;

"Until a completely new politics, that is, a policies no longer founded on the exception of bare life - is at hand, every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile, and the "beautiful day" of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness in which society of the spectacle condemns it" (page 11). Recognizing able bodiedness and disability as twin sides of the biopolitical imagination can contribute to the new politics to which Agamben gestures by denaturalizing the logic of the ability that informs modern processes of exclusion and extermination. Such a project can help recast questions of human agency and ethics away from the discourse of human rights and it's close alliance with neoliberal ideology to consider much more deeply our shared vulnerabilities as a human community.