

Cosmopolitanism as Biopower: Creating and Targeting Cultural Others

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Abstract

The paper analyses cosmopolitanism from the lens of biopower. The central argument is that the actual and prospective actions undertaken in the name of upholding the cosmopolitan ideals perpetuates biopower. Cosmopolitan ideals here imply the tendency to transcend territorial boundedness. The smokescreen of justice serves to legitimate the narrow self-interest of few powerful countries. Borrowing the notion of 'bare life' and 'docile bodies', the paper presents the argument that the selective exclusion of certain social and cultural communities transcends domestic polity. It is no longer the case that a sovereign authority in a domestic polity controls and regulates populations. Though there is no sovereign power at the international level, the hegemonic stature achieved by the liberal capitalist model is seen analogous. The contemporary drives toward fighting with justifications that are rooted in cosmopolitan ideals clearly exemplify such a construction of enemy by 'othering'. Such actions do not always proceed towards a spatially defined target but are often directed towards a culturally specific racial other. The contemporary drive for cosmopolitan wars allude to such a reduction of constructed others and perpetuation of ideational hegemony. Organisations like the NATO, though claim to work under the authorisation of the Security Council resolutions, the ultimate outcomes clearly demonstrate a hegemonic aspiration. A certain model of governance – US-style liberal democracy is this case – is seen to be more appropriate than the existing model or other alternate models. The paper, through empirical evidence, confirms the hypothesis that cosmopolitanism helps sustaining a model based on biopower.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, biopower, othering, bare life, docile bodies, hegemony, justice

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Introduction

The central argument of the paper is that the practice of cosmopolitanism is an exercise of biopower. The paper argues that the actual and prospective actions undertaken in the name of upholding the cosmopolitan ideals perpetuates biopower. The uncritical acceptance of any model of governance is problematic. The paper, thus, engages with the notions of cosmopolitanism and biopower and tries to uncover the inherent problems. Following a post-structural analysis of contemporary world, the paper argues against hegemonic nature of liberal universalism and posits that the dominant stature achieved by the 'liberal' community of states is an expression of the perpetuation of biopower. The practice of cosmopolitanism, especially those of cosmopolitan wars allow the narrow, self-interested motives of powerful nations to be camouflaged as just and altruistic.

Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is the theoretical premise for the notion of global justice. Put simply, it implies the tendency to transcend territorial boundedness. Cosmopolitanism could be defined as a moral ideal that emphasises tolerance towards differences and envisages the possibility of a more just world order. The idea is that the duties of human being towards fellow human beings should not be limited to compatriots. Equal moral worth of individuals irrespective of their citizenship remains the central concern. The normative argument is that one's duty towards fellow human beings does not stop at national boundaries. Several scholars have emphasised the idea that territorial boundaries, which used to matter the most in recent history, no longer holds such unquestioned sanctity (Beitz, 1975, 1979; Cabrera, 2004; Caney 2005; Dower 2009; Held, 2010, 2011; Pogge, 1992, 2002, 2007). These scholars differ in their degree and prescriptions. Some focus more on legality, some on morality. Some advocate cosmopolitanism with stronger degree, some are content with a weak notion of it. However, three elements are shared by all cosmopolitan positions. First, *individualism*: the ultimate units of concern are human beings or persons. Communities, nations or states may be units of concern only indirectly, through their individual members or citizens. Second, *universality*: the status of ultimate unit of concern is attached to every living human being equally. Third, *generality*: persons are ultimate units of concern for everyone and not only for their compatriots or fellow religionists (Brock, 2009; Pogge, 2007, 2011).

Scholars have discussed two variants of cosmopolitanism – 'interactional' and 'institutional' cosmopolitanism (Cabrera, 2004). Interactional cosmopolitanism assigns direct responsibility for fulfilment of human rights to other agents, while institutional cosmopolitanism assigns such responsibility to institutional schemes. On the interactional view, human rights impose constraints on conduct, while on the institutional view they impose constraints upon shared practices (Cabrera, 2004; Pogge, 1992). In the context of an analysis through the lens of biopower, the institutional variant of cosmopolitanism is of more interest. The constraints imposed on shared practices are clearly not inclusive. The exclusion created at the level norm creation at institutional level perpetuates hegemony and thereby leads to further marginalisation.

Bipower

Bipower can be defined as a form of power that has its focus on 'human life at the level of populations' (Neal, 2009). Foucault focuses on the forms, locations and practices of modern power in its plurality. He is concerned with the ways in which such a modern power organises and shapes human populations. Foucault extends his study of disciplinary power, with its focus on the normalization of the productive individual, to biopower. The shift, for Foucault, occurs from power/knowledge that was concerned with 'training an individual within the walls of an institution', to that of power/knowledge that is concerned with 'promoting human life generally' (Foucault, 1976, 1984, 2000; Neal, 2009; Reid, 2008). The mass public programmes of the nineteenth century are expression of such biopower. Such programmes aimed at reshaping the 'living conditions of populations' through proper sanitation, creation of transportation and communication networks and mass of mass immunisation for eradicating several diseases (Neal, 2009).

Biopower, as power over life, takes two main forms. First, it disciplines the body. This process implies that the human body is treated like a machine and looked at in terms of productivity and economic efficiency. The examples the exercise of such biopower is seen by Foucault in the military, education and workplace whereby it seeks to create disciplined population that would be more effective. Second, it regulates the population. This process implies that the reproductive capacity of the human body is emphasised. This form of bio-power appears in demography, wealth analysis, and ideology, and seeks to control the population on a statistical level (Neal, 2009; Reid, 2008).

Foucault argues about the move from a singular and centred power that threatens death to such forms of power that are plural and decentred and that promote life. 'Sovereignty took life and let live. And now we have the emergence of a power that... consists in making live and letting die' (Foucault, 2002: 247). Death remains an outcome of modern practices of power. However, once it is considered statistically at the level of populations, selective policy choices about where to allocate funds or withhold them often result in 'letting die' rather than directly causing to die. Examples might include the concrete numbers of lives saved by increasing funding for road safety, or not allocating more resources to tackling the AIDS pandemic.

The Theory of Othering: Foucault and Agamben

The poststructuralist critique of liberal governmentality based on modernity in general and that of cosmopolitanism in particular rests on the assumption that modernity leads to the creation of certain conceptions as normal. This normalisation implies that certain forms of knowledge are considered more worthy than some other forms of knowledge. This sort of divide between what forms part of discourse and what remains excluded is the basis of creating a regime of truth that does not include multiple voices. This in turn leads to the creation of 'others' as the paper argues. Some notions are considered unworthy of being part of an idea of the so-called global good and this allows the formation of cultural others that is at the root of the problem in modern global polity (Choudhary, 2014).

Foucault and Othering

Foucault (1978) argues that the concepts that considered being natural are in fact not based on something 'objectively definable'. Using this argument, it could be ascertained that the discourse on justice, for instance, is not based on the existence of an object called justice. The concept of justice is rather defined by the collection of statements that are accepted as being about justice and those that are not. The question that Foucault raised was how and why certain statements emerge and get associated with the certain discourse, while others either do not emerge or are not accepted as part of the discourse. Foucault calls such conditions of existence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance the as the 'rules of formation' of a discourse (Foucault, 1972: 38). There are three aspects that are essential with respect to the rules of formation: the 'field of initial differentiation' wherein the discourse defines its object and differentiates itself from other discourses; the 'authorities of delimitation' who are assigned the authority and command legitimacy to make truth statements about the object; and the 'grids of specification', according to which the various parts of the discourse are 'divided, contested, related, regrouped, classified, derived from one another' (Foucault, 1972: 41-2).

Foucault (1978), presenting the relation of war to the society, addresses as to how the emergence of 'biopower' – concerned with exerting control over life – has led to a proliferation and intensification of the problem of war between societies (Foucault 1978). Regimes as perpetrators of violence and undertaking holocaust on their own population can be seen as a result of the emergence of such a biopower (Foucault, 1978; Reid, 2008). Foucault (1978) further engages with the paradox of 'political modernity' and argues that the reason for the increased tendency among the modern societies toward 'barbarous forms of war' can be attributed to the shift where power is oriented towards the exertion of control over life (Foucault, 1978). Wars, thus, are now seen to be waged on behalf of the existence of entire populations that gets mobilised for the purpose of 'wholesale slaughter' making massacres a vital phenomenon and normalised for 'life necessity' (Foucault, 1978; Reid, 2008). In the traditional view, war was perceived as a means to resolve disputes that arose between sovereigns – with clear distinction between the sovereigns and the corresponding subjects with respect to the location of power. In a biopolitical context, however, the exercise of power occurs at the 'level of the life of populations' and thereby war 'occurs in the form of a struggle between populations' (Dillon, 2008; Foucault, 1978; Reid, 2008).

Agamben and Othering

Agamben (1998) presents the ideas of 'bare life' that he deduces from the relation between 'politics, life and sovereign power'. The basic thrust of the argument is that by selective exclusion of certain forms of lives that are considered to be unworthy of living, the sovereign power reduces them to 'expendable form of life' or the 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998). The bare life, further, is banned from political and legal institutions. Furthermore, he presents the idea of 'inclusive exclusion' that posits the argument that the biological life is an integral part of the political life by the virtue of this very exclusion. It is in this 'zone of indistinction' between the biological and political life that sovereign power is able to produce bare life (Agamben, 1998: 7). In Agamben's view, modern life 'tends toward biopolitics' and reduces the individual to

'bare life' (Agamben, 1998). Human beings completely become the 'subject to rules and regulations and subject to exclusion' (Agamben, 1998). For Agamben, the notion of 'exception' is inherent in democracies. This exception starts to spread as the executive is given more space by the legislature as 'sovereignty occurs when a decision must be made' and it is the sovereign who has the final say in deciding on the exception and as to when the rules could be suspended (Agamben, 1998). This exception is characterised by 'unlimited authority' and the possibility of suspending 'the entire existing order' (Agamben, 1998; Hegarty, 2010; Jabri 2007; Vaughan-Williams 2009). It is this propensity to reduce the individuals to the form of bare that Agamben emphasises upon and this, in turn, creates a clear distinction between those who have the right to live and those who can be killed – being segregated as the others. The cosmopolitan wars clearly manifest this distinction wherein those, who support the order – as envisaged by the sovereign authority as desirable – are seen as adhering to the idea of achieving greater good.

Foucault's concept of 'docile bodies' is close to the idea of 'bare life' that Agamben presents (Agamben, 1998; Foucault, 1978). The difference, however, lies in the fact that while Foucault views the shift from politics to biopolitics as a 'historical transformation', Agamben considers the political realm itself as 'originally biopolitical' (Agamben, 1998; Vaughan-Williams, 2009). By this, it is asserted that instead of understanding the process of change in the nature of politics, Agamben makes a stronger statement that politics, by its very nature, is biopolitical. The Biopolitical nature of politics is sustained through the practice of othering. Individuals are normalised through the techniques of governmentality like 'statistics, population studies, health and family policies, and welfare policies' (Foucault, 2007).

The Practice of Othering

The contemporary drives toward fighting with justifications that are rooted in cosmopolitan ideals clearly exemplify such a construction of enemy by 'othering'. Such actions do not always proceed towards a spatially defined target but are often directed towards a culturally specific racial other. The contemporary drive for cosmopolitan wars allude to such a reduction of constructed others and perpetuation of ideational hegemony. Organisations like the NATO claim to work under the authorisation of the Security Council resolutions but the ultimate outcomes clearly demonstrated a hegemonic aspiration. A certain model of governance – US-style liberal democracy in this case – is seen to be more appropriate than the existing model. Cosmopolitanism, based on liberalism, provides the necessary legitimacy owing to the fact that it appeals through the garb of justice.

Construction of enemy undertaken by selectively picking up particular individuals and viewing their presence itself as a threat, defeats the very 'idea of equal citizenship before the law' (Jabri, 2006, 2007). The contemporary drive towards fighting with justifications that is rooted in cosmopolitan ideals clearly exemplify such a construction of enemy. It is to be noted that such actions do not always proceed towards a spatially defined target but are often directed towards a culturally specific racial other. The contemporary drive for cosmopolitan wars allude to such a reduction of constructed others and ideological hegemony can be seen at play. In this regard, the 2011 case of Libya and the role of the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) does provide for an illustration (Rabkin, 2011). Though the NATO forces claimed to

work under the authorisation of the Security Council resolution 1973, the ultimate outcome clearly demonstrated a hegemonic aspiration. A certain model of governance – US-style liberal democracy in this case – is seen to be more appropriate than the existing model. The garb of humanitarian motive is used to perpetrate violence and undertake a sort of cosmopolitan war, which does convey the move towards ideational hegemony.

Jabri uses these concepts of Agamben and Foucault and applies it to the transformed global polity. She outlines the dangers that the ‘liberal democratic polity’ faces when it institutionalises the practices that are meant to ‘target the cultural and racial other’ by drawing ‘violent racial boundaries’ (Jabri, 2007). Here, she uses Agamben’s ideas arguing that such a reduction of the citizen as ‘racial other’ leads to what Agamben refers to as ‘bare life’ – a life that is purposely made ‘devoid of rights, of history and of the capacity to speak’ (Agamben, 1998; Jabri, 2007). For Jabri (2007), the transformed global polity practices ‘othering’ through cosmopolitan wars. She provides an analysis of wars in the transformed global polity from the critical-theoretical viewpoint. Using the ideas of Foucault and Agamben, Jabri (2007) applies it to the domain of global politics.

It is important to take into account the situational variations between the west and the rest. Ayoob (2002) presents an argument from the subaltern realist perspective about a certain trade off between order and justice when he argues that the while ‘the North’, which includes the developed nations, is interested in justice within the boundaries of the states and order among the territorially sovereign states, ‘the South’, consisting of the so-called developing and underdeveloped nations, is primarily concerned about maintenance of order within the states and calls for justice among the territorially sovereign states (Ayoob, 2002). It is thus important to understand that by trying to impose a model that is typical of western civilization, the West is culpable of undermining the demand of the so-called global south.

The hegemonic aspirations of the existing power wielders clearly demonstrate the existence of non-altruistic motives garbed in humanitarian cloaks. The process of creating racial others and then attributing on to them the ‘right to die’ by reducing them to the level of ‘bare life’ and ‘docile bodies’ is what the actual scenario demonstrates (Agamben, 1998; Foucault, 1978; Jabri, 2007). The global war on terror and the selective othering of muslim population in a case that exemplifies this argument. Post September 11, muslims have been seen with an eye of distrust. The notion of bringing justice has infact led to a creation of ‘others’ who are tried, detained and tortured are no mystery. Regarding the situation post 9/11, Smith (2004) has argued that universal rationality has achieved undue significance.

The problem is further amplified when a secular country like India also tries to emulate the western notion of justice based on othering. Application of draconian laws like the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act of 2004 demonstrates the inability of the state to deal with dissent and discontent through dialogue. In the name of effective law and order to fight separatism and terrorism, the state is culpable of major atrocities on innocent people. Under the UAPA and other draconian laws, Indian government has arrested Maoist leaders and also allegedly arrested young Muslim men as preventive measure (Chakrabarty, 2012). Such acts by the government stand opposed to the very ideal democracy where every one is guaranteed

equality before law. By targeting particular communities, the security policies have in fact become modes of perpetrating insecurity. A recent instance pertains to the acquittal of 17 young Muslim men who were arrested 2008 for allegedly having links with terrorist organisations (Press Trust of India, 2015).

For Dillon and Reid (2009), the way liberal polities fight war is more about biopolitics than geopolitics. The demarcation between 'good life' and 'bad life' is what creates the 'foreclosure of avenues of emancipation' (Beardsworth, 2011; Dillon and Reid, 2009). Innocent lives being lost at the hands of drones in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq clearly demonstrate the policy of the west based on 'bare life'. Some lives are too unimportant to be seen beyond statistics. The argument is not that terrorism should not be fought. However, the othering of entire populations and killing people based merely on suspicion of having terrorist links is clearly not humanitarian. The predator drones strikes are carried out just on vague data available about potential terrorists and have claimed more civilian casualties than its actual purpose of targeted killing (Zenko, 2012). It is for these reasons that even the perpetuation of international terrorism is seen as a 'resistance' to the 'global regime of life' (Beardsworth, 2011; Dillon and Reid, 2009).

The process of othering is an exercise of biopolitics that is legitimised in the name of upholding cosmopolitan ideals. The episodes of intervention in the name of protecting the people when their own governments fail to do so does not really uphold justice. These exercises, legitimised through the terminology of 'Responsibility to Protect', claim to uphold human rights (Badescu, 2011). However, through the reduction of certain cultural groups as bare life and selectively targeting them, they do not in fact pursue an altruistic measure. The dominance of the 'liberal' west, instead, gets concretised. While biopower is a concept that has been used mostly in context of domestic polities that have a government, the present scenario clearly demonstrates the existence of such a power over life at the global stage.

Conclusion

The smokescreen of justice serves to legitimate the narrow self-interest of few powerful countries. Borrowing the notion of 'bare life' from Agamben and 'docile bodies' from Foucault, the paper presented the argument that the selective exclusion of certain social and cultural communities transcends domestic polity. It is no longer the case that a sovereign authority in a domestic polity has exclusive control over populations and regulates it. It is asserted here that even though there is no sovereign power at the international level, the hegemonic stature achieved by the liberal capitalist model is seen analogous. The pursuance of war in the name of upholding cosmopolitan ideals unsettles the foundation of morality itself. On one hand, the argument goes for supporting the notion of cosmopolitan citizen based on cosmopolitan morality and transcending the boundaries to converge the compatriot versus non-compatriot barrier. On the other hand, the pursuit to paint the world in a single colour by forcibly installing a certain preferred government model takes place. Those do not comply to such ideals are thereby relegated as non-compliant to the idea of a 'global good' (Choudhary, 2014). The paper, thus, confirms the hypothesis that cosmopolitanism helps sustaining a model based on biopower.

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