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The Suicidal State: In Advance of an American Requiem

Stuart J. Murray

ABSTRACT

Written in late March 2020 in the early days of the U.S. coronavirus outbreak, this essay represents a contingent reflection on the American pandemic response, mourning in anticipation of what would soon surely unfold. I argue that the State's long-standing sacrificial economies have in this moment culminated in a suicidal State. The term is Foucault's, appearing in a controversial lecture on biopolitics, Nazism, and "biological racism." Despite Foucault's problematic treatment of racism, I suggest that some aspects of this discourse might nevertheless be apropos in our context. The U.S. pandemic response is racism's suicidal State legacy writ large: an extension and retooling of historically racist infrastructures deployed (once again, again) in racialized domains (as more recent reports evidence), but in this moment also across biosocial inequities and vulnerabilities marked by differential fungibilities other than race.

KEYWORDS: biological racism, biopolitics, COVID-19, death, race

◆ no one wrote these lines
a protracted cry, a dirge
a requiem in advance

Maurice Blanchot once wrote, "The cry tends to exceed all language, even if it lends itself to recuperation as language effect" (Blanchot 1995, 51). For now, it would seem, any effectual recuperation remains uncomposed in the writing of the disaster. "If I say: the disaster keeps watch [*veille*], it is not in order to give a subject to the vigil [*à la veille*]; it is to say: the wake [*la veille*]"

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does not occur under the sidereal sky" (50). Less as vigil than as proleptic work of grief, then, this, in spectral solidarity with the dead: with those who will have been destined to die, and whose deaths will have been language-effects too: with those who (to borrow a phrase from Antonin Artaud) will have been suicided by society. Time has taken leave of its order.



In a 23 March 2020 segment of Fox News, Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick of Texas advocated a speedy return to work for Americans, many of whom found themselves under recent state and/or local government orders to shelter in place. These pandemic measures were and (at the time of writing) remain necessary in order to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, to prevent the collapse of the country's health care infrastructure, and to help mitigate future loss of life. Patrick asked his viewers, "As a senior citizen, are you willing to take a chance on your survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren?" To this he answered, "I'm all in." By this gamble, an economy of sacrificial exchange is preferable to losses in the American market economy. Some lives are expendable, of lesser value than others, and this valuation is patriotic. Patrick's sentiments were echoed by Glenn Beck, the popular conservative commentator, who on 24 March declared, "I would rather have my children stay home and all of us who are over fifty go in and keep this economy going and working, even if we all get sick, I would rather die than kill the country. 'Cause it's not the economy that's dying, it's the country." We are meant to accept a kind of economic nationalism: a nation that is no more and none other than its economy.

In a Collège de France lecture dating from 17 March 1976, Michel Foucault raises the singular specter of "an absolutely racist State, an absolutely murderous State, and an absolutely suicidal State" (Foucault 2003, 260). These converge, he suggests, when "the field of the life [that the State] manages, protects, guarantees, and cultivates in biological terms [is] absolutely coextensive with the sovereign right to kill anyone, meaning not only other people, but also its own people" (260). It is a peculiar moment in Foucault's scholarship because elsewhere he argues that, since the early nineteenth century, sovereign power has gradually been displaced by biopolitical power, and we have shifted both ideologically and technologically from a disciplinary anatomic-politics that individualizes toward a biopolitics that massifies and seizes on the life of specific human populations. In his brief discussion, however, these two forms of power—the sovereign right to "take life or let live" and the biopolitical

power to “make live and let die”—are superimposed: “That is where this mechanism inscribed in the workings of the modern State leads” (260).

Foucault will ask, “How, under these conditions, is it possible for a political power to kill, to call for deaths, to demand deaths, to give the order to kill, and to expose not only its enemies but its own citizens to the risk of death?” (254). To answer this question, Foucault turns to the concept of racism as the “basic mechanism” of modern State power. Racism, he writes, is “a way of establishing a biological-type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain” (255). This establishes a transactional economy where race and racism inform decisions over who will be made to live and who will be allowed to die—both to eliminate the enemy race and to regenerate one’s own, to cleanse and to purify. The logic is simple: “As more and more of our number die, the race to which we belong will become all the purer” (257). The State thus becomes suicidal by deploying a racism that is “not a truly ethnic racism, but racism of the evolutionist kind, biological racism” (261). Here, Foucault is describing the Nazi State, adding, “Of course, Nazism alone took the play between the sovereign right to kill and the mechanisms of biopower to this paroxysmal point” (260). Turning back to one of Foucault’s cited texts, we find striking examples of Nazi scorched-earth dogma turned back on the German *Volk* themselves. In the final days of the war, Hitler is reported to have said the following to Albert Speer, Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production: “If the war is lost, the people will be lost also. It is not necessary to worry about what the German people will need for elemental survival. On the contrary, it is best for us to destroy even these things” (Speer 1970, 440).

In a 10 February 2014 segment of Fox News, Donald Trump—today a “wartime president”—said, “When the economy crashes, when the country goes to total hell and everything is a disaster. Then you’ll have a [*laughs*], you know, you’ll have riots to go back to where we used to be when we were great.” A disastrous mythology of greatness has taken hold, once again world historical in its thrust: the race struggle, the struggle for mastery, for life and manifest destiny. Economic nationalism and white nationalism are once again superimposed. And so, despite the judicious scholarly criticism of Foucault’s problematic treatment of race, in this moment we might venture that Foucault was in part correct in his brief treatment of “biological racism.” But if COVID-19 indeed occasions a biological racism, it can be so only by virtue of the long history of “ethnic” racism that we now see being extended, retooled, and operationalized for application in what appears to be a biological domain organized by “endemic” inequities and vulnerabilities.

Contingently and with care, we must insist that Black or Latinx histories and experiences are not at all the same as the many experiences of “biological racism.” And yet, the State has proven indifferent (once again, again) to the sociocultural or racialized realities of lived lives, for life itself is exchangeable according to the differential embodiments and economies that the State exposes and exploits. And it is poised to mobilize—passively, to be sure, and in the name of a virus—the harrowing principles, the animus, of historical racist oppression for use elsewhere, a sham biologism rewritten into the “real” and redrawing the battle lines of the impending civil war (or “boogaloo”). It would seem that the State’s enduring strategies of racist oppression and resurgent white nationalism are easily mapped onto biosocial vulnerabilities, in the name of a natural or providential order. The infrastructures of systemic violence are architectonic. Who will get a ventilator or hospital bed when demand outstrips supply? Some version of utilitarian ethics will prevail in triage: the same old “utility”—ostensibly biologized—of lives informed by neo-Malthusian economies and histories of net “value,” “worth,” and “acceptable losses.” Here, Hurricane Katrina might offer an object lesson in the differential calculus of lives that (don’t) matter. Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism is resonant: “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death” (Gilmore 2002, 261). In the suicidal State, some may find a caustic irony—and cynical flight—in the specter of a racism turned back, in some instances, on racists themselves.

We arrive at a new paroxysm of State biopower, an ostensibly world-historical animus that Trump’s presidency has courted, and his court has presided over. For a very long time, of course, plagues and pogroms have gone hand in hand. This time, however, it would seem that the pogrom is providential: it *is* the plague and acts in its name. Our daily delivery unto slow death has been accelerated—no longer a slow surrender to poverty, microplastics, toxic pesticides, greenhouse gas emissions, and climate crisis. COVID-19 is the perfect pretext for a pogrom that needs little oversight once in motion: it is autogenic and it will suffice merely to do too little for too long (already, at the time of writing, America has become the epicenter of the global pandemic). The rhetoric of sacrifice is militaristic. It is murderous, but indirectly and biopolitically, in the passive voice of “letting die.” No matter, Trump and his ilk will not for a moment risk the sacrifice that will be visited on others in much greater proportion: those among us who are elderly, poor, unemployed, incarcerated, homeless, disabled, marginalized, racialized, without health insurance, or with preexisting medical conditions.

Many will be permitted to perish as a tribute—indeed, as paean—to the national economy. Moreover, the virus will exacerbate existing biosocial inequities and vulnerabilities—and one is tempted to assign COVID-19 a certain agency, so as to say: it will exploit precisely *these* inequities and vulnerabilities, further replicating the very conditions of American poverty and plutocracy.

In his recent responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, Giorgio Agamben asserts that the Italian response to the crisis has been “disproportionate” and represents yet another instance of the “state of exception” as a normal paradigm of government. “It is almost as if with terrorism exhausted as a cause for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic offered the ideal pretext for scaling them up beyond any limitation” (Agamben 2020a). In a text published some days later, he would clarify, “Our society no longer believes in anything but bare life. It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything—the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions—to the danger of getting sick” (Agamben 2020b). Agamben’s statements have been met with harsh criticism, but in the American context it is perhaps more appropriate to ask: isn’t the American State already founded, historically and economically, on the mobilization of bare life?

How might we reckon the enormous wealth and plutocratic power generated by the Atlantic slave trade, which obviously presumed the dispossession and differential fungibility—the exchangeability—of human lives for personal profit and “national” economy? “Getting sick” or dying is a foregone conclusion—a premise—and secondary to economic interests (that are not shared). If in this context we search for the “pretext” of the state of exception or bare life, we need look no further than the socioeconomic and political legacy of slavery and the terror that has followed, undead, in its wake. State biopower is not, *pace* Agamben, the exercise of sovereign exceptionalism so much as a vast and diffuse apparatus that presides over a sacrificial economy that is not—has never been—for “the People.” These conditions have been intensified (or some might say: “optimized”) under neoliberalism, where government’s role has been radically reduced to the administration of the economy (corporate tax cuts, bailouts, market interests) while individuals are left on their own, at this moment isolated and sheltering in place, forced to imagine mortal illness, life, and death—and not just in this moment, but across the future waves of epidemic, and the murderous memes and militias that will surely attend them.

A derelict president, constitutionally incapable of expressing either comfort or mercy, announced without irony on 18 March 2020 that he had deployed the U.S. Naval hospital ships *Comfort* and *Mercy* to house American (non-COVID) patients offshore. Ten years ago, the same *Comfort* had been deployed to Haiti to assist after a catastrophic earthquake near Port-au-Prince. Christina Sharpe's critical reading of the Haitian response gains added poignancy as we shuttle between epicenters, from earthquake to pandemic. Homing in on the *Comfort's* administrative and ethnographic gaze, she presents a photograph of a gravely injured young Haitian girl. "Affixed to her forehead is a piece of transparent tape with the word *Ship* written on it" (Sharpe 2016, 44). "Ship" is both material and metaphor in the afterlives of slavery, in the transportation of disaster: "Is *Ship* a proper name? A destination? An imperative? . . . Is *Ship* a reminder and/or remainder of the Middle Passage, of the difference between life and death?" (46). Cold comfort for Black "cargo," containerized, in the "wake" of slave ships, migrant ships, military ships. Turning to the *Comfort*, Sharpe writes,

We should pause . . . on the name and provenance of the ship. . . . "US," "military," "comfort," and "allopathic medicine"—each and together being terms whose connection in the lives and on the bodies of Black people everywhere and anywhere on the globe—warrant at least a deep suspicion if not outright alarm: from those experiments on board the floating laboratory of the slave (and migrant) ship, to J. Marion Sims's surgical experiments conducted without anesthesia on enslaved women; to the outbreaks of cholera in Haiti introduced by UN troops; to experiments with mustard gas on US Black soldiers in World War II to produce an "ideal chemical soldier"; to the Tuskegee and Guatemala syphilis experiments and their ripple effects; to the dubious origins and responses to the crisis of Ebola; to the ongoing practice of forced sterilization; to recent studies that show again and again that Black people in the United States receive inferior health care because they are believed to feel less pain. (50)

The litany and afterlives of these evils may soon find themselves transported and revived (once again, again) on the mortal bodies of those who, now fungible for reasons other than just the color of their skin, will be exchanged "for keeping the America that all America loves."



Under this sidereal sky, what unexpected solidarities, undeclared friendships, and requiems will be written in the days and deaths to come? One must hope. As Blanchot once wrote, “When the subject becomes absence, the absence of the subject, or dying as subject, subverts the whole sequence of existence, causes time to take leave of its order, opens life to its passivity, exposing it to the unknown, to the stranger—to the friendship that never is declared” (Blanchot 1995, 29). For now, keeping vigil, language awaits its recuperation. For now, a cry, but not just: a call.

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