

BIOPOWER AND THE HEALTH EMERGENCY*

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Abstract

This short essay aims to analyze the imaginary of the new health emergency (Covid-19) and the power relationships revealed by it. Such an unprecedented state of exception leads to the surfacing of a secularised symbolism based on the concepts of dread and redemption, as an expression of new forms of command and obedience typical of biopower and its distinctive production of consent.

Keywords: Biopower, Health Emergency, State of Exception, Dread, Redemption.

We are currently witnessing a new, unprecedented phenomenon for generations who were born after the Second World War, id est a global health crisis generated by the incipient pandemic known as Covid-19, triggered by a previously-unknown coronavirus. Beyond any medical or sanitary consideration, it seems interesting to analyse the imaginary of this new emergency and the consequences it has on a political and cultural level.

This epidemic appears to reveal an aspect which remained latent for a long time within the power relations that characterise all Western political systems represented by the liberal-democratic formula¹. That is the Hobbesian concept of fear as the foundation of the social pact and of obedience

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¹ «This legal and moral basis, or principle, on which the power of the political class rests, is what we have elsewhere called, and shall continue here to call, the “political formula.” (Writers on the philosophy of law generally call it the “principle of sovereignty.”) The political formula can hardly be the same in two or more different societies; and fundamental or even notable similarities between two or more political formulas appear only where the peoples

to an established power: by no coincidence, the state of nature in Hobbes is marked precisely by the fear of death².

In this case, however, such a concern is extended to the domain of nature, as it no longer takes the form of a simple fear of a violent death caused by a human act, but is expressed as fear of death in general, regardless of the causes that determine it. Biopower³, in this sense, significantly modifies the Hobbesian pair of obedience in exchange for protection⁴, since it transcends a strictly-political domain, symbolised in this case by the sword⁵, to project its action on the totality of an individual existence. The ongoing health emergency, like any other crisis of the same tone, entails the unleashing of unconfessable fears rooted in the dread of an uncontrolled, chaotic and irrepressible death, to which the political systems react through the evocation of a state of exception⁶ or emergency.

professing them have the same type of civilization (or to use an expression which we shall shortly define...)» (G. Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, trans. by H. D. Kahn, McGraw Hill Book Company, New York – London 1939, p. 71).

² «... and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; ...» (T. Hobbes, *Of the natural condition of mankind as concerning their felicity and misery*, *Leviathan* in *The political works of Thomas Hobbes*, Musicaum Books 2017). «We must therefore resolve, that the Originall of all great and lasting Societies, consisted not in a mutuall good will men had towards each other but in the mutuall fear they had of each other» (T. Hobbes, *Of the state of men without Civill Society, De cive*, in *The political works of Thomas Hobbes*, op. cit).

³ «Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it. Power can achieve an effective command over the entire life of the population only when it becomes an integral, vital function that every individual embraces and reactivates of his or her own accord. [...] The highest function of this power is to invest life through and through, and its primary task is to administer life. Biopower thus refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself. [...] In the passage from disciplinary society to the society of control, a new paradigm of power is realized which is defined by the technologies that recognize society as the realm of biopower. [...] By contrast, when power becomes entirely biopolitical, the whole social body is comprised by power's machine and developed in its virtuality. This relationship is open, qualitative, and affective. Society, subsumed within a power that reaches down to the ganglia of the social structure and its processes of development, reacts like a single body. Power is thus expressed as a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population—and at the same time across the entirety of social relations» (M. Hardt – A. Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England 2000, pp. 23-24).

⁴ «The Obligation of Subjects to the Sovereign is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth, by which he is able to protect them. For the right men have by Nature to protect themselves, when none else can protect them, can by no Covenant be relinquished. ... The end of Obedience is Protection; which, wheresoever a man seeth it, either in his own, or in another's sword, Nature applieth his obedience to it, and his endeavour to maintain it» (T. Hobbes, *Of the liberty of subjects*, *Leviathan* in *The political works of Thomas Hobbes* op. cit.).

⁵ For a brief examination of the symbolism of the sword as a whole, cf. J. Chevalier-A. Gheerbrant, *Sword* in *Dictionary of symbols*, trans. by J. Buchanan-Brown, Penguin Books, London – New York 1996.

⁶ Cf. C. Schmitt, *Political theology*, trans. by G. Schwab, University of Chicago Press, Chicago – London 2005, pp. 5-15.

Here the foundation of sovereignty in post-modern Western political systems clearly emerges⁷. If, as Schmitt argues, the holder of sovereignty manifests themselves in emergencies and in every exceptional situation⁸, it can therefore be deduced that in such contexts the actual sovereign is the dialectical relation between political power and knowledge. In other words, a sort of diarchy is established between those who rule during a precise historical moment and those who possess the necessary scientific skills to deal with contingent problems, which influences both the declaration of the emergency and the methods used to deal with it. As far as the Covid-19 pandemic is concerned, the political leaders who initially were reluctant to implement measures that would restrict fundamental freedoms, including people's freedom of movement, found themselves, after listening to health experts' considerations, having to make very drastic decisions in that regard⁹. Very significant examples of this instance are the sudden changes of strategy adopted by the President of the United States of America (Donald Trump)¹⁰, the French President (Emmanuel Macron)¹¹ and the British Premier (Boris Johnson)¹².

In this sense, biopower, as much as possible and through the management of scientific and technological knowledge, promises each individual something more than just protection from other human beings. The post-modern dialectic between knowledge and power indeed identifies a general lifestyle and standard of living beyond which existence appears unacceptable and in which death, though inevitable, must be controlled and procrastinated as long as possible thanks to biomedical sciences and to the spread of specific individual behaviors. It stands out, therefore, with great

⁷ Though the considerations in this short essay could be extended beyond the Western civilisation in many ways, for simplicity, intellectual honesty and convenience of presentation we will stick to it and to its political paradigms.

⁸ «Sovereign is he who decides on the exception... He decides whether there is an extreme emergency as well as what must be done to eliminate it» (Ibidem, p. 5 e p. 7).

⁹ Cf. G. L. Gatta, *I diritti fondamentali alla prova del coronavirus. Perché è necessaria la quarantena*, Sistema Penale, April 4th 2020. <https://www.sistemapenale.it/it/articolo/diritti-fondamentali-coronavirus-necessaria-una-legge-sulla-quarantena-gian-luigi-gatta?out=print>

¹⁰ https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_marzo_21/coronavirus-usa-ecco-fauci-l-immunologo-che-tiene-bada-trump-deb4a664-6bb9-11ea-8bdc-8d7efa0d8720.shtml; https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_marzo_13/trump-dichiara-stato-d-emergenza-tutti-ospedali-siano-pronti-e3266a92-655c-11ea-86da-7c7313c791fe.shtml

¹¹ https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_marzo_17/coronavirus-grande-fuga-parigi-accuse-macron-sapeva-non-agi-ac94a914-689d-11ea-9725-c592292e4a85.shtml

¹² https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_marzo_23/coronavirus-johnson-si-arrende-chiude-tutto-fuori-solo-cibo-medico-o-sport-51e12f28-6d53-11ea-ba71-0c6303b9bf2d.shtml

evidence, that dread is at the root of both the most significant political choices and the propensity to obedience. Hence, the rulers' fear of losing the social consensus on one hand, and the citizens' anxiety for their future¹³ and for the many protections they enjoy thanks to the action of biopower on the other, influence both the tendency to behave in accordance with the models indicated by those who govern and the choices of the *élite* in orienting and defining the dominant behavioural models. In this context, the political decisions within the Western civilisation are determined by the interaction between power, knowledge and the people, on the grounds of a fear that always evokes hope, namely the sacred pair of dread and redemption.

In other words, within the Western civilisation there have been, historically, in a position of great importance in the scale of shared values, both a mixture of deference and fear (dread) towards the divine¹⁴ and a desire to be purified from a state of impurity and suffering (redemption). Such a symbolic horizon has an enormous relevance in the Judeo-Christian tradition and is not foreign to the pagan tradition either. In particular, the idea of redemption is substantiated either in a sacrifice in exchange for salvation in a socio-political sense (the salvation of the community to which one belongs, the city or the emperor) – of which various examples can be found in the classical civilisation¹⁵ – or in a sacrifice for the salvation of the people or humanity as a whole, as in the biblical tradition¹⁶. In the course of modernity, however, dread and redemption, like many other concepts,

¹³ Cf. P. Bellini, *Cyberfilosofia del potere. Immaginari, Ideologie e conflitti della civiltà tecnologica*, Mimesis, Milan – Udine 2007, pp. 36 -41.

¹⁴ «Before going on to consider the elements which unfold as the 'tremendum' develops, let us give a little further consideration to the first crude, primitive forms in which this 'numinous dread' or *awe* shows itself. It is the mark which really characterizes the so-called 'Religion of Primitive Man', and there it appears as 'demonic dread'. [...] Though the numinous emotion in its completest development shows a world of difference from the mere 'daemonic dread, yet not even at the highest level does it belie its pedigree or kindred. Even when the worship of 'gods', these gods still retain as 'numina' something of the ghost in the impress they make on the feelings of the worshipper viz. the peculiar quality of the 'uncanny' and 'awful', which survives with the quality of exaltedness and sublimity or is symbolized by means of it. And this element, softened though it is, does not disappear even on the highest level of all, where the worship of God is at its purest. Its disappearance would be indeed an essential loss. The 'shudder' reappears in a form ennobled beyond measure where the soul, held speechless, trembles inwardly to the furthest fibre of its being» (R. Otto, *The idea of the holy. An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, trans. by J. W. Harvey, Oxford University Press, London 1923, pp. 16-17).

¹⁵ Cf. J. Toutain, *L'idée religieuse de la Rédemption et l'un de ses principaux rites dans l'antiquité grecque et romaine*, in *École pratique des hautes études, Section des sciences religieuses. Annuaire 1916-1917*, Paris 1916.

¹⁶ Cf. Old Testament *Isaiah* LII, 13, LIII; New Testament, *Matthew* I, 20-22, VIII, 17; XII, 17-20, XVII, 12, XVIII, 12-13; *Mark* IX, 11, X, 45; *Luke* XIX, 10, XXII, 37; *John* XII, 38. Acts of the Apostles, *Romans* III, 23-25.

have undergone a process of inevitable secularisation and have acquired a different symbolic and social function. This does not mean that for believers, id est for those who are still anchored to the sphere of the sacred on an identity level, the fear of God and the desire for salvation-redemption in a religious sense have disappeared. It rather means that, on a social level and from a symbolic point of view, the dominant collective imaginary is currently influenced by a sense of dread and a desire for redemption which are subject to a symbolic sliding from a theological-sacral level to an empirical and profane dimension. The fear and mystery of death, which originally converged into the fear of God or gods, intended as spiritual or supernatural powers, turn into the terror of being swallowed up into nothingness, unless one has those qualities of courage and awareness typical of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*¹⁷. Without gods any longer safeguarding the cosmic order, justifying with their presence the purpose of each individual existence, the post-modern subject gained the awareness of living on a small planet, lost in the vastness of sidereal space, in a universe unknown to them in many ways. All that is left, therefore, is the awareness of their own miserable material existence and, consequently, the dread of a premature and uncontrollable end in accordance with the rituals of biomedical knowledge, as a function of the imaginary and symbolism thriving in it.

Power, therefore, in its biopolitical form feeds on this fear, adopting it as an *instrumentum regni*, a method to govern, invoking, when necessary, the right to life against the right to freedom (in this case, of movement, association, meeting and economic enterprise). Obviously, it is easy to predict that in Western societies all the freedoms that are being denied sooner or later will be restored, in accordance with the liberal tradition and for obvious economic needs, so that the limitations appear as a set of temporary and inevitable measures. In any case, no government can afford to put people's lives into question for the purpose of safeguarding their freedom, since, as we tried to show, safety tends to be culturally considered above everything else.

However, in this conflict between rights (life v. freedom), the foundational core of post-modern biopower emerges, since, thanks to the state of exception, the most authentic character of the

¹⁷ «Before God! – Now, however, this God hath died. Before the populace, however, we will not be equal. Ye higher men, away from the market-place! Before God! – Now however this God hath died! Ye higher men, this God was your greatest danger. Only since he lay in the grave have ye again arisen. Now only cometh the great noontide, now only doth the higher man become -master! Have ye understood this word, O my brethren? Ye are frightened: do yours hearts turn giddy? Doth the abyss here yawn for you? Doth the hell-hound here yelp at you? » F. Nietzsche, *The higher man*, in *Thus spoke Zarathustra. A book for all and none*. trans. by T. Common, Project Gutenberg 2016).

relationship between command and obedience, which is at the root of globalised civilisation, shows itself. What the state of emergency lets to the surface is indeed the possibility of resorting to the fear of death, loss of lifestyle or acquired safety at any time, in order to push everyone to obedience and acquiescence. This does not happen because people are coerced by a constrictive threat, by the fear of punishment for disobeying the government's provisions, but because the citizens themselves, every time they feel afraid, end up calling for effective and incisive measures of all kinds, even in violation of their own fundamental rights. Biopower, which neither governments nor people can avoid, qualifies therefore as an essential and indispensable vital function, consisting of an inevitable series of procedures where at the top of the pyramid of pursued values are life, safety and the preservation of material well-being, to which every other right appears expendable. Every time an emergency and the state of exception that ensues are invoked, the exercise of freedoms such as those of movement or association seems a foolish and criminal act and there is a risk for those who uphold it to become a scapegoat for the scourges that afflict the community¹⁸. At this point, provided that the concept of state of emergency and a threat to life and safety can only lead to exceptional measures, in the face of which nothing has value anymore, the question that all authentic liberals should be asking themselves is whether this attitude, once the crisis is over, does not risk creating dangerous and permanent habits. A danger, as a matter of fact, could consist, for example, in extending *sine die*, and in accordance with the arbitrariness of the typical dialectic between techno-scientific knowledge and power, a substantial mutation in the approach to and in the possibility of claiming one's fundamental rights, leading society towards a *comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom*¹⁹.

Next to the dread, then, as an almost spontaneous and compensatory by-product of the fear every emergency sparks, a desire for redemption arises. Also in this case, this will of redemption takes on desacralised traits, obeying the secularising logic which is implicit in modern culture. Redemption no longer carries explicitly sacred or spiritual characteristics: it is rather conceived within a mundane horizon, where it is not sins or human arrogance before the Christian God or the pagan gods (*hybris*)²⁰

¹⁸ On the concept of *scapegoat*, cf. R. Girard, *Violence and the sacred*, trans. by P. Gregory, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1977.

¹⁹ H. Marcuse, *One dimensional man*, Routledge, London – New York 2002, p.3.

²⁰ *Hybris*, in ancient Greek culture, means 'arrogance', 'insolence', 'outrage', indicating a human challenge to the divine will followed by a terrible punishment.

that determine its symbolic horizon, but the sense of inadequacy before uncontrollable phenomena. It becomes a sort of redemption from ignorance, from a general inability to predict the consequences of human actions and from a lack of knowledge that needs to be filled. While in pre-modern Western culture redemption is always a form of atonement before the divine, whose benevolence and forgiveness are invoked, the modern and post-modern civilisations re-elaborate that concept in a very peculiar way. It almost always takes on the meaning of bringing what escapes human understanding back under the control of knowledge, so that redeeming oneself means controlling the uncontrollable, thus reclaiming a knowledgeable subject from ignorance and a known object from a lack of control. This symbolic device can be easily observed in every state of exception and emergency, as is the case, in particular, with the global outbreak of this unknown and unpredictable virus. Power, in this case, as we showed, has mobilised biomedical knowledge in search of cures, vaccines and drugs capable of initiating redemption and of purifying humanity from the impending threat of a natural force that for the time being is still uncontrollable. Dread and redemption show therefore the symbolic paradigm of salvation through the secularised dynamics of a religious pattern that is typical of the Christian culture, following the sequence of epiphany (origin of the saviour), salvation, resurrection and *parousia*²¹. In this specific case, in connection with the ongoing pandemic, this sequence takes on the desacralised features of the biomedical field, turning the religious pattern into the following symbolic scheme: someone, perhaps a group of researchers, devises a cure (epiphany), the cure works (salvation), sick people recover and normality is restored (resurrection), the grip of biopower can be firmly established again on a recalcitrant nature (*parousia*). It can be stated in general that the secularised model of salvation, stimulated by the combination of dread and redemption, expresses itself in the biopolitical context through a symbolism whereby: danger can be faced through a mobilisation of knowledge and/or technology carried out by power, that approach provides a solution, the emergency is defeated (return to normality), biopower manifests its newfound effectiveness and governments increase their social consensus, presenting themselves as restorers of what seemed lost.

²¹ *Parousia* indicates in the New Testament the return of Christ at the end of times to establish the Kingdom of God. Cf. G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in essence and manifestation*, trans. by J. E. Turner, Harper & Row Publishers, New York – Evanston 1963; P. Bellini, *L'immaginario politico del Salvatore. Biopotere, sapere e ordine sociale*. Mimesis, Milan – Udine 2012.

What has been briefly described clearly shows how biopower does not need any liberal guarantees in any way, or, more generally, any doctrine such as liberalism, as it is both theory and practice of the limitation of power itself. This specific form of the relationship between command and obedience rather exists independently of any possible limitation. It thrives in the absence of limits, extending the logic of control, thanks to technology, to every area of society and individual existence, in accordance with a *totalitarian* framework that includes a systematic tendency to dull critical thinking and compress individual freedom. Such a totalitarian model does not depend, in this case, on an ideological project, on the will of a group, a party or a charismatic leader whatsoever; it rather amounts to a spontaneous tendency connected to the role played by new electronic and information technologies that implement cybernetic-type patterns of control at the social level. However, this must not be thought of as an inescapable fate, against which there is no defence, except for resigned acceptance and spontaneous adaptation²²; in fact, *where there is danger, the rescue grows as well*²³. These poetic words by Hölderlin, which I used rather freely, giving them a completely different interpretation than Heidegger²⁴, lead us, in this case, to reflect on the very same technological power laid out to control, to systematically disintegrate privacy, to uncritically spectacularise reality²⁵ and the *status quo*, which can also be used to go in the opposite direction. The same technologies, as a matter of fact, can also provide very powerful tools to strengthen individual freedoms, protect privacy and critically approach the facts and power relations that characterise the political and social sphere. Furthermore, at the collective imaginary level, new technologies can also convey, in certain cases, a vision of the emergencies that takes the paranoid form of conspiracies, about which a symbolism that identifies the root of all evils that afflict society²⁶ with a particular social group, with some hidden *élite* or with a plan covertly pursued by secret services in collusion with governments and the most powerful global *corporations* gets developed. These forms of the imaginary also follow the same

²² Cf. Y. N. Harari, *Homo deus. A brief history of tomorrow*, Vintage, London 2017.

²³ F. Hölderlin, *Patmos*, trans. by S. Horton, Harper's magazine 2007.

²⁴ Cf. M. Heidegger, *The question concerning technology and other essays*, trans. by W. Lovitt, Harper & Row, New York – London 1977.

²⁵ Cf. G. Debord, *The society of the spectacle*, trans. by K. Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkley CA 2014 and *Comments on the society of spectacle*, Verso, London 1998.

²⁶ M. Introvigne, *Nuove mitologie religiose. Teorie del complotto e popular culture*, in Treccani XXI secolo, 2009 http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/nuove-mitologie-religiose_%28XXI-Secolo%29/, 2020.

symbolic dynamics connected to the dread/redemption pair, where dread takes on the typical features of demonic forces of empirical and historical nature, while salvation-redemption goes through the unveiling of a hidden truth, followed by the wish to neutralise or protect oneself from the actions of the hidden oppressor or by the bitter consideration of one's own impotence.

However, the various forms of conspiracy theories, briefly mentioned, appear very dangerous for the defence and survival of a free society in the face of technological intrusiveness and the natural illiberal tendency of biopower itself, since they mask its actual structural aspects. The real threat to human freedom comes indeed from two typical aspects of post-modern civilisation, intimately connected to one another: technocracy and the dominion of algorithms. With the advent of globalisation, a new ruling class was formed, whose vocation, selection and legitimation does not have solid political bases but is implemented through the exhibition of technical expertise, specialised knowledge and management skills. These latter characteristics, if oriented in accordance with profound ethical convictions, knowledge of one's own cultural (i.e. historical, artistic, literary, religious, symbolic, etc.) heritage and a philosophical vision worthy of its name from which political knowledge can be drawn, represent the expertise that is necessary to manage complex social, economic and scientific phenomena. If, however, as happens more and more frequently, technical and specialised skills are the only instruments with which one approaches political decisions, while ignoring everything else and being indifferent to any other instance, the prevalence of such a commanding logic can only lead to a dark universe that will be indifferent to freedom. Human existence will be modelled, as a consequence, in accordance with a para-totalitarian schema, without any consideration for populations or individuals subject to it, who will lose, in the eyes of the decision makers, all the authentic characteristics that make them human. They will rather take on, each time, all the connotations that are functional for the rule of specialised knowledge they are subject to, and they will soon find they have become only consumers, producers, *prosumers*, patients, customers and so on, in the most total, spectacular, sweetly narcotising and unwitting enslavement ever²⁷. At that point there will be only algorithms, whose existence, far from being restricted to the algebraic-mathematical domain, will assume the symbolic value of a new form of social management and control, totally indifferent to individual and collective happiness and well-being.

²⁷ Cf. A. Huxley, *Brave new world; and Brave new world revisited*, Harper perennial, New York 2005.

It is, in this case, a subversion of the relationship between knowledge and power of the Platonic kind, which, in itself, already included very disturbing features for any real demand of individual freedom in a modern sense, to which the very same political culture of the *polis* appears, for that matter, completely indifferent²⁸. At least there the rulers, by virtue of metaphysical and philosophical knowledge, were to carry out justice, intended as a balance among classes, in accordance with their corresponding, and prevailing, parts of the soul²⁹. Here, on the other hand, any ideal of justice seems to have vanished, only performances, exhibitions and precision in the execution of commands matter, in accordance with a mentality fed by algorithms and cold quantitative models. The relationship between command and obedience thus changes its paradigm of reference, shifting from the mechanical-bureaucratic one of early modernity, to the current, electronic, computer-based, algorithmic one. In the face of all this and since the beginning of the modern age, important political antibodies, in terms of individual rights, separation of powers and economic freedoms (of enterprise and commerce), were developed and socially implemented by the liberal culture. Therefore, in spite of the terrible totalitarian intoxication that, between the two World Wars, took the mechanical-bureaucratic logic of the State-machine³⁰ to its extreme consequences, a free society still managed to survive and rise from the ashes, even in places where freedom and human rights had long been denied and repressed.

The new challenges awaiting it, since nothing is lost, will then depend on the new cultural and political antibodies that inevitably will have to be developed to stem any new para-totalitarian drift.

²⁸ Cf. B. Constant, *The Liberty Of Ancients Compared With That Of Moderns*, Liberty Fund (on-line) 2010 and I. Berlin, *Four essays on liberty*, Oxford University Press, London-Oxford-New York 1975.

²⁹ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, trans. by R. Waterfield, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1994.

³⁰ Cf. C. Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. by G. Schwab and E. Hilfstein, Greenwood, Westport-London 1996.



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