

# Securitizing ‘Bare Life’? Human Security and Coronavirus

Written by Giorgio Shani

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GIORGIO SHANI, APR 3 2020

The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) which has infected more than a million people and resulted in more than 50,000 deaths worldwide since its discovery in Wuhan, China in December 2019 arguably constitutes the greatest threat to human security since the ‘Spanish’ flu a century before. It has forced a fundamental rethinking of the way we live, how we related to others, and indeed, as some commentators have alluded to, what it is to be human. For the influential Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, the virus has led to the erasure of ‘our fellow humans.’ Humans are seen as potential carriers of the virus, ‘an invisible enemy that can nestle in any other human being.’ Since the ‘enemy isn’t somewhere outside, it’s inside us’, our common humanity intrinsically constitutes a *security* threat. This inverts the logic of security premised on the protection of human life from outside, whether these are posed by other states or existential threats such as hunger and disease (Shani 2014).

While many would balk at Agamben’s claim that the epidemic – as opposed to the virus – had been ‘invented’, its political effects as experienced through the imposition of states of emergencies, the securitization of public space, self-isolation and ‘lockdowns’ constitute a challenge to the norms of democratic politics and everyday life. Indeed, the Chinese Communist party under Xi Jinping has been widely praised for its handling of a crisis which it helped to create, not least by the head of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who lauded the ‘speed, scale and efficiency’ of Beijing’s response. Even US President, Donald Trump, despite his recent criticism of the Chinese leadership as the US overtook the PRC as the country with the most COVID-19 cases, repeatedly praised Xi Jinping in February as China got to grips with the crisis.

This suggests that authoritarian states are better able to protect their citizens from the existential threat posed by the virus- and their fellow citizens who carry it. They can intrude upon the private lives of their citizens with relative impunity, tracking their movements with mobile technology, and quarantining whole regions more effectively with the military than the Police. Significantly, they can do so without unravelling the social bonds which tie the nation together, thus preserving political order. But are authoritarian regimes in a better position to guarantee our human security? If so, what does this mean for the future of liberal-democracy? Finally, what implications are there for the subjects they seek to protect?

Turning to the first question, authoritarian states are better able to provide security when facing *external* threats but the means which they use – the securitization of target populations through often coercive measures- constitute a threat to the human security of their own people. Human security has been defined by the United Nations General Assembly (2012) as the ‘right to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair.’ Broadly-speaking a distinction is made between ‘narrow’ and ‘broad’ approaches. Whereas the ‘narrow approach’ emphasises the protection of the individual from ‘violent threats,’ the ‘broad approach’ seeks to *empower* as well as protect the individual from both ‘fear’ and ‘want’. If and when the COVID-19 crisis is over, authoritarian states will face challenges to their legitimacy in the absence of further existential threats. Agamben’s ‘invisible enemy’ will take different forms: the ‘virus’ harboured by the individual may revert to a subversive political or religious belief which, states will argue, endangers the body politic. Locking down Wuhan or Delhi, therefore, legitimizes the securitization of Muslims in Xinjiang or Kashmir.

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This has implications for the future of liberal-democracy. As illustrated by democratically elected ‘populist’ governments in Brazil, Hungary, India, Russia and Turkey (and arguably but contentiously, the US), authoritarian regimes do not necessarily constitute a threat to the very liberal-democratic structures which enable it to exercise power. States of emergency can be declared by democratic as well as authoritarian governments. The Fascist governments of Italy and Germany did not seize power through military coups but were initially democratically elected. Indeed, the Nazis never formally abolished the Weimar Republic as the German legal scholar, Carl Schmitt (1985), infamously argued. Thus, ‘from a juridical perspective, the entire Third Reich can be considered a state of exception that lasted twelve years’ (Agamben 2005: 2). The crimes against humanity inflicted by the Nazi regime were, therefore, crimes committed by an authoritarian regime ruling a nominally democratic state. Agamben (2005) contentiously extended Schmitt’s analysis of the state of exception to include the US, which he considered had inaugurated a global state of exception after 9/11 through the ‘war on terror.’ The discourse of the war on terror’ legitimized the incarceration of foreign citizens in detention ‘camps’, most infamously Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, which he implicitly compared to concentration camps.

This leads us to the final question: what are the subjects which states are seeking to protect? It is here where Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life’ may help us. For Agamben (1998:4), ‘bare life’ corresponds to the ancient Greek term *zoe*, which expresses the simple fact of living: ‘bare life is life which can be killed but not yet sacrificed’. This differed from the term *bios* which denoted a qualified life: a life with dignity, endowed with meaning which was consequently considered ‘worthy’ of sacrifice. In the classical world, *zoe* was excluded from the *polis* and confined to the sphere of the *oikos*: the home. This is the very place where social distancing measures and public health interventions by the state seek to confine us. We are repeatedly told to ‘stay at home’ and ‘wash our hands.’

But what of those who have no home? Or hand sanitizer or face mask? Or access to running water? The referent object of Coronavirus discourse is a homeowner with the economic means to take time off work and stockpile food. For the majority of mankind, this isn’t an option. The conditions of life considered ‘normal’ by both Agamben and the states he critiques, are the products of a particular type of exploitative social relationship with colonial roots: capitalism. The subject that states protect is a *racialized*, bourgeois and gendered subject.

This can be seen in the correlation between class, race and infection rates in the US. For example, in New York, infection rates are roughly four times higher in Queens than in wealthier and whiter Manhattan or Brooklyn. The fact that the most vulnerable people are also those of retirement age is also significant for they are deemed surplus to the requirements of a functioning capitalist economy. They are, to use Mark Duffield’s term, ‘disposable’ populations (Duffield 2007) sacrificed at the altar of productivity and efficiency. From this perspective, the problem with ‘herd immunity’ in the UK was not that it endangered the security of the older generation but that it threatened to overwhelm an underfunded National Health Service.

Furthermore, the figure of ‘bare life’ appears to be stripped of all agency and dignity. What is discounted by Agamben is that people may actually *want* to stay home in order not to spread the virus to others. They may not want to meet their friends in order to protect them and forgo going to restaurants, bars, pubs and clubs out of deference to other customers. The religious may choose to stay away from Churches, Mosques, Temples, Shrines and Gurdwaras so as not to infect other worshippers. In so doing, those who stay home may be constitutive of a newly emerging global ethic; one borne out of solidarity based on a mutual vulnerability in the face of an existential threat: a human security without a sovereign.

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