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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Jeroen de Kloet** University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic stirs up strong nationalist and localist sentiments; places pride themselves on containing the virus more effectively: We are doing better. We call this 'biopolitical nationalism', understood by us as the dynamics between body, geopolitics and affect. When looking at mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, we analyse how the biopolitical efforts of these places are being compared, applauded and supported. Under a discourse of life and survival, this celebration of biopolitical control does not fall into the classic reproduction of capital, but speaks to geopolitical identification. Biopolitics has morphed into a field of competition, of rivalry, of nationalistic – or, perhaps more generally, localist – power games. What can we do as Cultural Studies scholars?

Keywords

Biopolitics, China, COVID-19, Hong Kong, Taiwan

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Granted, to think of Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics when reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic is neither surprising nor original; many have done so already. Most notably in this regard is Giorgio Agamben, whose commentary regarding the biopolitical containment measures taken in Italy enraged quite a number of people for its alleged disrespect for the actual dangers of the virus (Agamben, 2020). The commentary suggests that the virus was conjured up by the authorities and media in order to push through authoritarian measures. Agamben mobilizes the concept of biopolitics as a critical tool to probe into the workings of the nation-state, and the multiple ways it controls the population under the threat of the virus. We can understand Agamben's critique as much as the critique of his critique. In this essay, we do not want to start with how we should see the world, but with what we are observing. We are not going to engage with the 'Agamben debate', not because it is not important, but because we have observed something going on in the parts of the world we are more familiar with – Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China – and this something from the field urges us to think of biopolitics in a different way. When the virus is spreading, when infection figures and death tolls are announced on a daily basis, when bodies are at risk, we are witnessing not only how easily local populations comply with what the authorities have to say, whether in the form of advice or command; they readily celebrate the success of their compliance. If they stay tuned to government speak and expert talk eagerly and anxiously, they seem to be churning out their own popular tune, reassuringly and self-congratulatorily: we are doing it well, we are actually doing it better, better than others.

In observing these contexts, we start to realize one main point we want to test out here: that it is not enough to simply reassert the classic Foucauldian biopolitical critique, the one reiterated by Agamben. Yes, indeed, the people are being controlled, more intensely and extensively in the times of COVID-19. In mainland China, mobile phone tracking technologies are deployed; in Hong Kong, wristbands are distributed to secure home quarantine. At the same time, they seem to be fine with it, perhaps even more than fine – they seem to be stating: the more we are being controlled, the more we are in control. It occurs to us that the virus is not only infecting, but also affecting. And there is a need, we feel, to observe and document another form of biopolitics, of power games. We call it – hesitantly – 'biopolitical nationalism', understood by us as the dynamics between body, geopolitics and affect. We write 'hesitantly' as nation-states are not always the geopolitical entities being celebrated, as we will see in Hong Kong's case later. For the time being, we use the term to refer to Foucault's insistence that power is also always a productive force, and our observation of the myriad ways in which the biopolitical efforts of nation-states are being compared, applauded and supported. Under a similar discourse of life and survival, this celebration of biopolitical control does not fall into the classic reproduction of capital, but speaks to geopolitical identification.

We take East Asia as a case, and we will confine the remit of our argument accordingly. For provocation's sake, however, we do believe we are also witnessing

similar cases of biopolitical nationalism in Europe and beyond, as citizens pride themselves on living in a country with the ‘best’ and ‘most efficient’ containment measures. While the outbreak has pushed the Tokyo Olympics and Eurovision Song Contest into a more distant future, another competition seems to be taking their place, ranking the success of containment measures on a global scale. See, among others, the ‘COVID-19 Safety Ranking’ put forward by the Deep Knowledge Group, a Hong Kong-based consortium of commercial and non-profit-oriented organizations. Leading the top 40 list are Israel, Germany, South Korea, Australia and China. There are also lists for risk ranking and treatment efficiency ranking.¹

Pending more systematic empirical work, this essay (written in late April 2020) is driven by what has shown up via our social media connections: Facebook, WhatsApp and WeChat messages, and what has been shared and forwarded by our contacts on these platforms. We are amazed by the online celebration of Taiwan, by those within Taiwan as well as diasporic members, which, as we read on Facebook posts, owes its success of containing the virus to its democratic system and innovative high-tech applications. Ranging from the earlier praise that Taiwan was quick in securing enough masks for its people, to the more recent reports pointing to the creativity, vibrancy, colour and diversity of Taiwanese-designed face-masks, messages reiterating and refining the success story abound. This success story is now spinning off into a campaign to obtain Taiwan’s membership of the World Health Organization. The political complexity entailed in this campaign was vividly displayed during a press briefing, when this membership question was put forward to WHO Assistant Director-General Bruce Aylward, who, after some silence and unease, replied: ‘Well, we’ve already talked about China’. His reply confirmed the official WHO stance that Taiwan is part of China which is already a member, and thus his rebuttal of the question. Besides, according to WHO regulations, only United Nations members are allowed, and China, not Taiwan, is a member. In short, we sense from the shared and forwarded posts that many Taiwanese people feel safe, protected and justified in pushing forward Taiwan’s already existing nationalistic and exceptionalist agenda. Saluting the ‘anonymous heroes’ fighting the virus, one social media user says it all: ‘Taiwan is great! ... Taiwan is proud of you, and we are proud of Taiwan!’ (dated 14 April 2020).

On the other side of the Straits, citizens also applauded the Chinese Communist Party for imposing stringent measures that helped ‘flatten the curve’, and parents asked their children who studied in Europe to return as quickly as possible, in order to escape from the weak and sloppy measures taken by European countries. Our social network connections with mainland China frequently started to feature official slogans, such as, ‘Unfilial sons are those who bring the virus to their parents in their hometown’; ‘Without a mask, you may end up with a respirator’; ‘Only shameless people still hang out’ and so forth. While Beijing was initially critiqued for admitting and announcing the crisis too late, online discourses soon manifested a strong sense of acceptance, if not consensus, that strong levels of

intervention were inevitable and actually necessary. The people were quickly represented as vulnerable, needing to be protected, monitored and interpellated as part of the virus-fighting machinery. Those who refuse to partake and follow the lockdown instructions, as we read from the messages shared with us, are condemned as ‘unfilial’, ‘shameless’ and ‘irresponsible’, accurately corresponding to the scripts of official slogans. Once the spread of domestic infection was finally curbed, one of the key secrets to the Chinese success, as asserted by the Chinese ambassador Xu Hong in the Netherlands, was ‘the full mobilization of the public’. When the epicentre moved to Europe and America, the highly motivated Chinese public was first surprised by the slow reaction of the European bureaucracy. A popular response, as expressed by one Weibo post, was: ‘Why don’t they just copy the homework!’ (dated 15 March 2020). In the Weibo channel of the state-run *People’s Daily*, similar comments were posted in response to the virus spread in Italy and Spain, calling Europe to issue a full lockdown as Hubei had done. The surprise about the European response was quickly morphing into sentiments of pride and nationalism, when the Chinese government started sending medical teams to other countries; one comment read: ‘In 2020, China becomes to save the world, while the United States, once we all regarded as super powerful, now couldn’t even save itself’ (dated 20 March 2020). Given that nationalism has been growing on the Chinese Internet for a while (see, for instance, Schneider, 2018), it may not be surprising to detect similar affective expression on Chinese social media during the pandemic. While military and economic power has always been the cause for national pride, the latest trigger has become efficiency in the exercise of biopower, especially vis-à-vis the ‘inefficient West’.

In Hong Kong, given the tension between large sections of the population and the government as demonstrated in the continuing protests during the last half of 2019, we do not see the kind of online celebration of official containment regime as sketched above. What is frequently circulated is the city’s prior experience with the SARS virus, implying and sometimes asserting its better understanding of and preparation for the new onslaught. Relatedly, Facebook and WhatsApp messages from local people, whether pro- or anti-government, invariably endorse an ostensibly scientifically grounded discourse, and support the ubiquitous use of masks as an effective measure to combat COVID-19. Admittedly, it is not only masks that Hong Kong people subject their bodies to; there is a whole host of cleansing agents they carry and apply diligently. However, masks have become almost a symbol for the city to proclaim its edge over elsewhere in the world, especially when compared to the unmasked, unenlightened West. On the day when Hong Kong announced zero new infections, a YouTube clip of CNN’s report titled ‘Coronavirus Pandemic: Hong Kong’s positive example in global debate on masks’ (dated 20 April 2020) was circulated on social media. More is going on, however, in this biopolitical tug-of-war. If containment measures in mainland China seem to supply biopolitical nutrients to its nationalistic sentiments, and if Taiwan is capitalizing on its apparent biopolitical effectiveness to push forward its nationalistic

claim, Hong Kong does not only pride itself on local biopolitical performance – the city also pitches it against a larger backdrop: the city versus the nation. This brings us back to our hesitant use of the term biopolitical nationalism – it may be more apt to understand Hong Kong’s experience as a case of biopolitical localism. At the outset of the virus outbreak, the Hong Kong government was critiqued by both pro- and anti-establishment camps for not closing its borders with the mainland. Posts alluding to malpractices and misinformation in China are regularly and widely circulated. The message, presented in various versions, is clear: the city is doing better than, if not without, the nation.

What is happening here? How can biopolitics become a field of competition, of rivalry, of nationalistic – or, perhaps more generally, localist – power games, in which the geopolitical entities that control the ‘best’ are being celebrated and praised, and those that fail to control are looked down upon? We do not claim to know. What we have observed and sketched here is how differently biopolitics is being played out – different from, for instance, what Agamben is referring to. And this brings us to our final point, or rather, a lingering sigh: what can we, as Cultural Studies people do? When Bruno Latour famously wondered in 2004 whether critique has run out of steam, he was lamenting how the right has appropriated the tools from the critical left. Indeed, one can hear an echo of Foucault when climate sceptics claim that global heating is merely a discursive construct that supports the hegemonic powers. Now, we have moved to yet another level of appropriation and tweaking. Poor Michel! His notion of biopolitics, meant as a critical tool to unpack the workings of power, in particular, the ways in which nation-states and capitalism measure, manage and control the population, is now turned into an aspirational category: we want to be controlled, we want to be controlled more and more effectively, and we are angry that some states have failed to do so! Geopolitical entities are ranked according to their governance and containment success. Critical intellectuals may deride it as a biopolitical nightmare, but many hail it as a nationalistic or localist dream. Sensing the affective expressions in this containment period, we believe we are indeed living through a ‘populist moment’. In Chantal Mouffe’s (2018) words, ‘We can speak of a “populist moment” when, under the pressure of political or socioeconomic transformations, the dominant hegemony is being destabilized by the multiplications of unsatisfied demands’ (p. 11). We see all this flux right now. But if COVID-19 has somehow managed to collectivize the people as people, the populist process we have observed in the aforementioned contexts seems to be along nationalistic or localistic lines, not exactly destabilizing, at least not in the ways we would have hoped to observe. Mouffe continues her prediction for a left populism in the following manner: ‘In such situations, the existing institutions fail to secure the allegiance of the people as they attempt to defend the existing order’ (Mouffe, 2018: 11). How different this is from what we have observed: the existing institutions seem to know better. They are doing better.

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1. <https://www.dkv.global/covid>

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