

Biopolitics and the Experience of the Cambodian Genocide

From the Holocaust to the recent conflict in Darfur, the past century has indeed witnessed countless political atrocities. Much work has been done to address these atrocities in the way of reparations and justice, both on the political and academic fronts, but the discourse on genocide remains contentious. Despite genocide being formally defined by international law under the *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide* as well as comprehensively reviewed in the ‘Analysis Framework’ provided by the Office of the United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG), generally defining genocide runs the risk of narrowing our view of the scope of its repercussions. While most instances of mass violence are recognized as some form of genocide under the legal definition, several instances fail to adhere to key criteria. A primary example is the Cambodian genocide, which lacks sufficient evidence to prove that its perpetrators, the Khmer Rouge, had the “intent to destroy, in whole, or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” (What is genocide?). Although such a technicality is crucial to the narrative of the Cambodian genocide, its legal implications are far more impactful when it comes to Cambodian refugees who are still coping with the trauma of the Cambodian genocide and thus, require (but are sometimes denied) legal protection and aid from their country of asylum. Moreover, in a discourse dominated by and filtered through the Holocaust and western democratic framework, respectively, it may be, in some cases, difficult to understand genocide in a different context (e.g. Southeast Asian and communistic). In other words, the current approach to addressing genocide at a political level is lacking in that it refuses to acknowledge the myriad cultural, political, and economic factors that certainly complicate a genocide, but are merely circumstances that reinforce it as a genocide, nonetheless. Therefore, it is worthy to consider an alternative framework that takes into consideration these constituent factors but also allows us to more broadly analyze instances of mass violence according to their deeper internal operations.

Such a framework is provided by Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, the main scholars engaged in the conversation surrounding *biopolitics*. Initially theorized by Foucault in Part Five: *Right of Death and Power Over Life* of The History of Sexuality, Volume I, the concept of biopolitics was meant to explain the shift from the Medieval model of absolute power to a more complex notion of power relations better suited to the modern world. Taking into consideration the development of capitalism and political technology like scientific racism, Foucault proposes biopolitics as a more accurate account of contemporary power dynamics within a social body. For Foucault, biopolitics supplants sovereign power as the primary method of population management. Through the use of “biopower” instead, which works to control the human body and life, Foucault claims that power is no longer granted by a social contract between subjects, rulers, and the law, but rather, a more complex function of relations between subjects and (institutionally disseminated) social norms. It is here that Agamben picks up on Foucault’s discussion of biopolitics. While Agamben can conceive of a biopolitical body, he argues that it cannot be separated from sovereign power in the way that Foucault has described. On the contrary, Agamben believes that the biopolitical body is precisely the product of sovereign power carried out successfully. Thus, while Foucault’s account of biopolitics is one of monopolization of both the individual and social bodies, Agamben’s account of biopolitics follows the gradual transformation of the social body into a biopolitical body through sovereign. While it is important to note these key distinctions between Foucault and Agamben’s conceptions of biopolitics, it is their synthesized discussion of biopolitics in general that will provide the basic model for a more comprehensive framework in which we can examine genocide. As new and innovative conceptions of modern power dynamics, Foucault and Agamben’s accounts of biopolitics lend themselves to illuminating those political situations that would have made little sense under the western democratic framework. Therefore, in the interest of extending a more accommodating discursive approach to instances of mass violence that may not be fully recognized by the international law definition of genocide, I will apply both Foucault and

Agamben's biopolitical methodologies to the Cambodian Genocide. Ultimately, I will demonstrate that this methodology allows us to gain a more insightful understanding of the Cambodian Genocide that is not rooted in the cultural, political and economic factors which distinguish it from the Holocaust, but rather, contextualizes it precisely within the criteria which legitimize the Holocaust as a genocide in the first place.

The Power to Govern under Foucault's Biopolitics

Within Foucault's biopolitical framework of power, two sub forms of power can be observed as operating in modern society. The first is disciplinary power, which focuses on the individual body. According to Foucault, disciplinary power is

...centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the *disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body*. (Foucault 139)

By extension of the first form of power, the second form of power, regulatory control/population management, focuses on the "species body" (Foucault 139). The species body in this case is

...the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. (Foucault 139)

Together, disciplinary power and regulatory power constitute *biopower*, the main instrument of biopolitics.

Through the lens of bio-power, we see that power dynamics operate in a number of ways beyond the power of the "ancient" sovereign in a modern society. With the survival and well-being of the species in mind, "there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (Foucault 140). Especially in the case of the development of capitalism, it was crucial that bodies be conducive to the "machinery of production"

and that populations adjusted to “economic processes” (Foucault 141). As a result, biopower became significantly institutionalized. At this level, biopwer was not only able to objectify the body as capital, but segregate and hierachize the population in favor of production as well. Through the establishment of norms, biopower was able to police life in ways that the juridical-legal authority of the sovereign could not. While the law of the sovereign was armed with death, this one-dimensional sense of authority could only work so far as to enforce what was explicitly specified by the sovereign. In the modern, life-rendering framework of biopower, however, the norm not only works within the law, but in the interest of the sustainability of society as well. The norm serves as a ubiquitous policing force that is present in a “continuum of apparatuses” such as medicine, administration, and social welfare. Although the norm does not necessarily replace law, in a modern society, it is more so the case that the norm becomes incorporated into the judicial institution.

The Power to Govern under Agamben’s Biopolitics

For Agamben, the modern preoccupation with preserving life does not transcend the power of the sovereign (as in the case of life-rendering norms pervading/becoming the rule). On the contrary, all matters of biological and political life beg the jurisdiction of the sovereign. Thus, in the modern age, when the line between biological and political life becomes increasingly blurred, biopolitics becomes the program of management of a population under such circumstances. Moreover, the preoccupation with preserving life is addressed not through institutionally disseminated, disciplinary and regulatory technologies as in Foucault’s conception of biopower; instead, preserving life is at the discretion of the sovereign who dictates the kinds of life that are acceptable.

Unacceptable Life: Homo Sacer

“An obscure figure of archaic Roman law,” *homo sacer* (latin for “sacred man”) was the title and status given to an individual who was guilty of certain crimes (Agamben 8). Because of this “sacred” status, *homo sacer* was exempt from the law in ways that made him acceptable to kill with impunity, but unacceptable to sacrifice. Alive, yet, constantly threatened by the possibility of death,

homo sacer occupies an indistinctive space between life and death where human and divine laws are suspended. Essentially, the status conferred upon *homo sacer* makes it so that he is stripped of his rights to participate in both the biological and political realms of life. As such, *homo sacer*, being the antithesis to the sovereign (in the sense that, on the contrary, the sovereign was a divinely appointed leader, and thus, could not be killed without immense punishment), exactly represents the kind of life that is not acceptable, and therefore, the figure who individuals looking to preserve life in a modern society—in a biopolitical society—did not want to be.

Bare Life

In establishing the two extremes of the sovereign and *homo sacer* in his concept of the “sacred man,” Agamben thus places individuals within the social body in the position of *bare life*. Defined against the ancient Greek distinction between *zoe*, the biological life of all human beings and animals, and *bios*, the civic life of members within a political community, bare life, like *homo sacer*, emerges as a third term referring to the intermediary between natural and political life. Here, Agamben draws on Foucault’s appropriation of the “Aristotelian animal.” Considering the political landscape of an advancing modern society, Foucault reckons that the political animal, for which political capacity was once just an additional aspect of human existence, is rapidly becoming dependent on politics for its livelihood (Foucault 143). This notion of a “changing relationship between the state and the biological life of its citizens” is foundational to Agamben’s biopolitics. On Agamben’s analysis of modern power dynamics, the ability to foster life as a result of more advanced technology and productive economic processes is precisely political. Therefore, the fostering of bare life is equally important in gaining biopolitical control of the social body. In doing so, the sovereign is able to maintain control over both the behavior of life and its political capacity.

The Exception

Agamben’s notions of *homo sacer* and bare life are based on a logic of exception exercised by the sovereign. This logic of exception can be seen in the paradoxical states underlying the

positions of *homo sacer* and bare life. On his reading of Hobbes, Agamben found that ‘the state of nature’ and ‘the City’/state of political life did not chronologically precede or follow one another, but rather, emerged in spite of one another:

Far from being a prejudicial condition that is indifferent to the law of the city, the Hobbesian state of nature is the exception and the threshold that constitutes and dwells within it. It is not so much a war of all against all as, more precisely, a condition in which everyone is bare life and a *homo sacer* for everyone else. (Agamben 102)

Thus, for Agamben, such states of suspension serve as points of comparison for the “acceptable kinds of life” designated by the sovereign.

In applying the biopolitical framework of power to the Holocaust, both Foucault and Agamben’s accounts are able to shed light on the intricate forces at play in genocide. For Foucault, who claims that “if the power of normalization wished to exercise the old sovereign right to kill, it must become racist,” the logic of disciplinary and regulatory power underlies the racism of the Holocaust (Foucault, eleven 256). For Agamben, the Jew living under Nazism is “a flagrant case of *homo sacer*” (Agamben 68). In both cases, Foucault and Agamben illustrate the biopolitical power dynamics at work within genocide.

Biopolitics of the Cambodian Genocide

On Foucault’s analysis of biopolitics, the situation of the Cambodian Genocide is very much a case of maintaining productivity. Under the communist ideology and Pol Pot’s vision for a classless, agrarian society, the ruling norms became that of unquestioned loyalty to the Khmer Rouge and constant work/physical strength capability. Using Foucault’s logic of racism as a justification for killing in the name of normalization, Khmer Rouge officials were seen to have enforced hard work with the “power of life and death”. Those who did not conform to the desired “race,” (i.e. working class citizens dedicated to the sustainability of the nation, not intellectuals, Buddhist monks, and all others considered “not pure”) were deemed unfit for the growth of the nation and as a result, ran the

risk of being killed. This embodiment of the proposed norm was crucial to survival at the level of disciplinary power.

At the level of regulatory control/population management, tight controls on the working conditions such as long work hours and meager food rations not only created docile bodies for the communist regime, but eliminated those who would not be productive within the regime. In addition to this strict policing of bodies, the management of social order was implemented to gain biological control of the population. The mass weddings were meant to engineer the kind of docile bodies that would aid in the productivity of the regime, while the flipping of traditional social order in training young soldiers to work against their families and elders, conditioned the population to abandon past ties and relationships in order to become fully dedicated to the Khmer Rouge. Overall, the Foucauldian account of biopolitics provides a thorough framework through which to examine the internal power dynamics of a society bent on equalization through productivity.

On Agamben's analysis of biopolitics, on the other hand, the situation of the Cambodian Genocide is a more complicated case of creating and maintaining a biopolitical body. Here, the distinction between Foucault and Agamben's biopolitics is very clear. Keeping in line with Foucault's notion that the shift from sovereign power to biopower was fueled by an ever-growing concern for fostering life, the Cambodian Genocide under Foucault's analysis could only be justified by a rationale regarding life preservation. Thus, the mass killings of Cambodian citizens could only be justified by a logic of racism—a determination to eliminate all threats to flourishing life. In Agamben's biopolitics, however, the mass killings could be viewed as a practice in creating a biopolitical body par excellence. Those who were killed were *hominess sacri* in that the natural and divine laws within the regime did not apply to them; as "sacred" individuals, they lived outside the rule of the regime in the first place. Therefore, the killing of these *homines sacri* was done with absolute impunity.

Moreover, the identification of these *homines sacri* (in this case, intellectuals, minorities, the disabled, and others considered not pure by the Khmer Rouge’s standards) combined with the identification of Pol Pot as the sovereign, forced the citizens of Cambodia into a position of ‘bare life’. Occupying a space suspended between life and death, the citizens of Cambodia took on the position of biopolitical body, a position of subjugation that became the very rule of the land. With the promise of a better life and society under Pol Pot’s communist regime and the threat of death looming around the figure of *homo sacer*, the citizens of Cambodia oscillated between the possibility of political life and the degeneration into natural life.

Based on this analysis, it is clear that the Cambodian Genocide, though never explicitly rationalized as an attack against any particular group, exploited the general Cambodian population in very intricate and intentional ways. From the ridiculous productivity expectations to the very specific standards for “acceptable life,” it is obvious that the Khmer Rouge was engineered, if not officially as a genocide, to subjugate a mass using terror at the very least. Although such terror seems to be the consequence of an unrealistic political regime, the biopolitical framework provided by Foucault and Agamben reveals that on the contrary, the Cambodian Genocide, as distinguished as it may have been when it came to its cultural, political and economic circumstances at the time, was still much like the Holocaust in that it ultimately relied on the mass violence of others *in order* to achieve its political ends.

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