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PLANETARY CONFINEMENT: BIO-POLITICS AND MUTUAL AID

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The three modes of power identified by Michel Foucault are by now well known: sovereign, disciplinary, bio-politics. In a series of lectures at the Collège de France between 4 January and 17 March 1976 and later published in English as *Society must be Defended* (2003), he clearly explains that whilst certain periods necessitate the proliferation of one mode of power over another, it does not mean that the other two disappear. From the nineteenth century onwards, he notices that bio-politics, the right to make live and die, supplements sovereign power's right to take life and let live. Disciplinary power, becoming apparent in the late seventeenth and eigtheenth centuries, focuses on individual bodies and develops techniques from exercise, spatial separation, to surveillance, normalising bodies with the aim of increasing productivity. In the second half of the eighteenth century, disciplinary power gets *bio-politicised*. It is no longer primarily focused on individual bodies or what Foucault calls 'man-as body but […] man as species' (Foucault 2003, p. 243). Every crisis or every war (recall that Foucault's *Society must be Defended* analyses power through the problematic of war – and specifically the war between the races) brings forth different configurations of these modes of powers. Not long ago in *Precarious Life* (2004) Judith Butler gives an account of the US and allied bellicose response to 9/11, noticing a coalition between sovereign and bio-political power, a coalition that, she suggests, has as an aim to augment and proliferate state power (Butler 2004, p. 58).

Foucault's reflections on power emerge from his interest in life, or more precisely from the warlike and messy organisation of life, seeking to understand who, or rather what, may have the monopoly over life. How can life be best organised so profit can accumulate

and what mechanisms can be used to achieve this (schedules, timetables, spatial separation, surveillance, dietetics, health statistics and so on)? His rich insights into the organisation of life from the classical to the modern era, insights that influenced a myriad of writers and thinkers since their publications – despite their anti-Marxist premise (Foucault 1980, pp. 1-37) – have the State as their framework. This last point is made more apparent in *Society must be Defended* (2003, pp. 238-263). There are two consequences of his outlook on the organisation of life and the modes of power that he developed. Firstly, the organisation of life is based on antagonism – power is possessed by the Sovereign, then transferred to the State and finally to technologies/disciplines of control who, irrespective of the differences that he identified in these forms of power, never cease to exert pressure, control, craftmanship over bodies and populations. Secondly, the effect that his modes of power project (and this is apparent in his analysis of disciplinary and bio-power) is akin to Darwinism, that only the fittest, or in his case the most normalised bodies or species will survive. Docile bodies need to be disciplined into shape so they can be more productive. Factory workers need to follow regimented schedules and be separated from each other so they can increase productivity. Populations need to be svelte, fit, follow healthy diets so as not to develop comorbidities and reduce cost on national health systems. I am not saying this because I am not interested or I find Foucault's thinking un-helpful in its depiction of the organisation of life, but rather because I think his preoccupation with the bellicose character of the organisation of life has led him to ignore writings that were around in the nineteenth century that had mutual aid as the main principle of the organisation of life.[1] For example, the polymath geographer

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[1] Mutual aid as a way of organising life was always present in society. Here are some examples from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Workers unions are one example of mutual aid. Workers formed unions to collectively bargain for better working conditions, working hours and payment. Kropotkin charts the growth of the union movement in the UK that flourished despite State oppression; *The Combination Act 1799* prohibited trade unions and collective bargain in the UK. When this Act was repealed in 1825 around 100 unions were

anarchist Peter Kropotkin had published *Mutual Aid* in 1902 in which he identified an organisation of life (human and animal) based on co-operation, lack of hierarchies and outside the State formation or more precisely rejecting the State as the framework through which life can be organised and flourish. I will return to Kropotkin's work later, but I wanted to mention his work as evidence of other ideas and practices concerning the organisation of life, that were available to Foucault to consider in his analysis of the government of life that he albeit sidestepped. As I mentioned above, I believe this is a consequence of his writings being shadowed by a Statist and Darwinian framework.

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created with over 100,000 workers from all kind of trades under the auspices of the Grand National Consolidated Union. The flourishing of unions did not last long. Workers were prosecuted for belonging to unions, through the *Masters and Servants Act 1823* – an Act of Parliament that regulated relations between employers and employees and consequently the Grand National Consolidated Union broke down. Nevertheless, despite the oppression of unions in 1841 new workers unions were formed (Kropotkin 2009, p. 210). Worker's unions were not the only form of mutual aid that Kropotkin identifies in the nineteenth century in the UK. Women factory workers formed clubs with the aim of saving money through small weekly contributions from their salaries so they could draw upon them when they needed to make an important purchase. Village clubs used their membership fees to support their members medical and funeral costs (Kropotkin 2009, p. 215). In the twentieth century we have a variety of mutual aid groups supporting local communities; For example, the Black Panther Party in the 1960s and 1970s run free breakfast clubs for all schoolchildren in need (Hilliard 2007, p. 7; Spade 2020, pp. 9-10); Housing Works which was founded in 1990 by four ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleach Power) activists and is still active reaches out to homeless HIV-positive New Yorkers and provides them with job training programmes and primary care clinics in order to help them rebuild their lives. The organisation funds its mutual aid activities through a bookshop café, a bar and a chain of thrift shops, not through State funds (Shepard 2002, pp. 351-359). In the twenty-first century one of the most notable examples of territories run on principles of direct democracy and mutual aid is The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syrian (AANES). AANES is run by street communes that make sure that nobody will be deprived from shelter, food, education, employment and more importantly that nothing is left at the mercy of capitalism (Sahin and Abbas 2020, pp 3-17).

Nevertheless, there may be another reason for omitting to concern himself with the mutual aid literature. Foucault undertook to study the nature and function of the norm and normalisation. There are numerous explanations of his understanding of the norm and its functions, but the general gist of his understanding of the norm crystalises in another series of lectures that he gave at the Collège de France between 1977 and 1978 and collected in *Security, Territory, Population* (2007). With the invention of statistics, the norm, what is normal, was deduced. Statistics aggregating, for example, the prevalence of smallpox in populations were able to provide data about what populations were more prevalent in catching smallpox and surviving, how vaccinations were affecting them, and were able to deduce from it certain norms about morbidity and mortality (Foucault 2007, pp. 61-63). His conceptualisation of the norm came to be associated with the dominant forms and patterns of life in society. Anarchist ideas and practices regarding the organisation of life were not captured by his understanding of the norm and therefore, we can speculate, were left unexplored in his juxtapositions of life management.

I do not want to undervalue Foucault's ideas about power and the management of life. Over the last thirteen or so months, and as a result of the Covid19 Pandemic and the planetary war against SARS-Cov-2 and its variants, our everyday lives have been both subjected to disciplinary power and bio-politics and akin to having daily lessons in Foucault's thinking. As individual bodies we have been asked to be confined to our homes, to adhere to strict disciplinary edicts (washing our hands, decontaminating our groceries, wearing masks, taking daily exercise, having regular breaks from our electronic devices, etc.) and subjected to endless statistics measuring who is more at risk of dying from the virus (populations with comorbidities; people over 50; BAME, ie. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic; cancer patients undergoing treatment; workers including health workers, care workers, cleaners etc., whose professions do not allow them to extract themselves from frontline working) to who will be

vaccinated first. Being disciplined to survive and experiencing the power to make life and death has exposed us not just to the sovereignty of the virus but moreover to the malevolent machinations of the State. Foucault in *Society must be Defended* has alerted us that the bio-political war that we will be facing is a racist war, and certainly the pandemic has revealed the mechanisms that the State and its servicemen/servicewomen explore to accelerate the war on races. Each time the UK government, despite the evidence that demonstrates that BAME populations are more at risk from dying or being hospitalised by the virus,[2] refuses to prioritise the vaccination of these populations (Elgot and Sample 2021) it is a reminder of how bio-politics work. It is a reminder, as Butler wrote repeatedly, of whose life is worth living and whose is disposable. We may say that this is the norm. This is the new normal. We can say that we have all internalised this new norm, and obediently and inadvertently are colluding with the State in augmenting its powers, of making and taking life. I want to suggest not only that this is not the new normal, but that to talk of norms is a rather narrow way of understanding the organisation and management of life.

In *Psychiatric Power* Foucault writes that the norm operates 'as the universal prescription for all' (2008, p. 55). In the UK and elsewhere (Sitrin and Sembrar 2021) during the pandemic and simultaneous to the proliferation of bio-politics, we have witnessed the birth of mutual aid groups, 'weaponised' with love and care, operating in non-hierarchical ways, distant from the profit-driven ethos of neoliberalism that goes hand in hand with the powers identified by Foucault, and ready to deliver material and psychic support to all that has been requested throughout the pandemic. More than 4,000 mutual aid groups (O'Dwyer

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[2] The UK Government report *Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups* (Public Health England 2020, p. 4) reports that 'the highest age standardised diagnosis rates of COVID-19 per 100,000 population were in people of Black ethnic groups (486 in females and 649 in males) and the lowest were in people of White ethnic groups (220 in females and 22 in males)'

2020) are operating at the moment throughout the UK. If the norm operates 'as the universal prescription for all' as Foucault has suggested, then we can argue that the existence of mutual aid groups points precisely to a way of organising life that not only does not use the State as its framework but moreover values cooperation, solidarity, deliberation, horizontal decision-making and care as its modes of organising life. This way of organising life is not new. The norm is not as universal as Foucault wants us to believe. The norm is not universal at all. As I mentioned earlier, Peter Kropotkin was one of the first to identify this.

In 1902 Kropotkin published his book *Mutual Aid*.[3] In this book Kropotkin challenged the then popular theory of 'survival of the fittest', a Darwinian idea (though the phrase itself comes from Herbert Spencer), and revealed that mutual aid was the most common instinct present in the human and animal kingdom. He identified that mutual aid is practiced within families (human and animal), where he found that the practice of mutual aid dominates, as well as in associations outside the family formation. For example, he observed that animals share their food or cooperate with one another even if they do not belong to the same family. Bees and ants provide some of his examples that demonstrate mutual aid between species. Another example is the cooperation that he witnessed between Brazilian kites and other vultures (Kropotkin 2009, pp. 43-44). This ability to engage in mutual aid is, however, not restricted to the animal realm. Humans also practice mutual aid. Apart from mutual support witnessed within familial environments, Kropotkin tracks mutual aid in villages, farming associations, and recreational clubs, as well as within unions and guilds, as in his observation of the organisation of apprentices in medieval times:

> In the medieval cities, when the distinction between masters and apprentices or journeymen became
> more and more apparent in the fifteenth century, union of apprentices . . . occasionally assuming an
> international character, were opposed to unions of masters and merchants. (Kropotkin 2009, p. 209)

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[3] For a contemporary activist guide to what mutual aid is see Dean (2020).

Even by the eighteenth century, when these unions were destroyed by various statutes, 'the worker's unions were continually reconstituted' (2009, p. 209). For transformations to occur, therefore, in early industrial societies, in terms of negotiating for better wages and working conditions, people tended to come together and form associations (unions, guilds) to support one another and to strive to achieve a joint well-being. Mutual aid was a long-established way of doing things in our world. Capitalism and neoliberal mentalities have valorised competition or the survival of the fittest *à la* evolutionary theory, but this does not mean – and this, to me, is Kropotkin's invaluable contribution that there are not other ways of doing things. Indeed, Kropotkin pointed out that in time of crises we observe that people tend to rally their energies and support those in peril. We have indeed witnessed this during the pandemic but we have been witnessing mutual aid groups or at least the mutual aid instinct in various social movement groups from *Black Lives Matters* to the various refugee rescue attempts, for example that of *Refugee Rescue*, a non-profit organisation and their boat 'Mo Chara' rescuing refugees since 2015 around the island of Lesvos.[4] In an earlier book, *The Conquest of Bread* (2015), Kropotkin explains how the instinct of mutual aid can guide us out of capitalist society and consequently away from the traps set out by the modes of power that Foucault identified. My aim here is not to explain how anarcho-communist associations can be formed and function away from the State, but rather a much more modest and simple point.

If the norm operates 'as the universal prescription for all' and if its operation has neither in the past nor in the present revealed its universality – it does not, in other words, operate as Foucault suggests at all. We have always had, and it seems we will always have, mutual aid groups, operating on the principles of solidarity, co-operation, lack of hierarchy – parallel to the modes of sovereign, disciplinary power. If we have always had these very

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[4] See the work of the refugee organisation Refugee Rescue (https://www.refugeerescue.org/).

antithetical ways of organising and supporting life then is it not misleading to talk about norms or, even worse, of its adjective, the normal? Even if we follow Foucault's other understanding of the norm as the optimal statistical aggregate, we cannot at this time ignore the global meteoric rise of mutual aid groups. They are, I speculate, a sign *not* that a new norm is emerging, or that a new normal is operating, but rather a critique of the claim that there was, or there ever will be such a thing as a norm.

Every crisis, every war, brings to the surface what was always already there, always present in front of our eyes, but we were unable to see it, so close to us that it was our blind spot. In our case I suggest that what has always been there are two parallel ways of organising life: one based on power; the other of mutual aid. The norm has always been the rhetoric, the apparatus in the hands of politics trying to keep us in our place. But we also know what happens when we are cornered; when we are oppressed.

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