

Op-Eds

Biopolitical Binaries (or How Not to Read the Chinese Protests)

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“The internalisation of a false binary in Western narratives risks resulting in misreading the Chinese protests by interpreting the protesters’ rejection of the authoritarian biopolitics of zero covid as a tacit demand for the necropolitics of the United States. At the same time, this type of binary thinking severely constrains our ability to comprehend the global lessons of the pandemic as we enter an age of collective crisis.”

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On 26 November, prompted by a deadly fire in a high-rise apartment block in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, protesters took to streets and campuses across the country calling for an end to the restrictive ‘zero covid’ policy (零疫情) (Davidson and Yu 2022). Unsurprisingly, the libertarian-right, anti-maskers, and anti-vaxxers wasted no time in celebrating the demonstrations as vindication of their own pandemic-era protests against any form of biopolitical state intervention. For instance, Charlie Kirk—leader of the ultra-conservative Turning Point USA—tweeted ‘China is looking a lot like Canada suddenly’, suggesting a parallel between Chinese protests and the so-called ‘Freedom Convoy’ of truck drivers who protested against vaccine mandates in early 2022 (Williams and Paperny 2022).

While we are hesitant to give the far right (which can no longer be understood as ‘fringe’) a further platform—which risks normalising through mentioning—these narratives have entered a shared atmosphere of resignation to the inevitability of Covid endemicity, as if the pandemic and all the suffering it has wrought was preordained and unavoidable. This normalisation of death due to Covid—framing it as an inevitable part of life itself—represents a post hoc justification for the disastrous pandemic outcomes in much of the West, particularly the refusal to attempt to eliminate the virus in early 2020. It also sets up a false binary understanding of pandemic possibilities: either nihilistic necropolitics (the ‘business as usual’ model) or an endless spiral of intensifying authoritarian surveillance.

The internalisation of this false binary in Western narratives risks resulting in misreading the Chinese protests by interpreting the protesters’ rejection of the authoritarian biopolitics of zero covid as a tacit demand for the necropolitics of the United States. At the same time, this type of binary thinking severely constrains our ability to comprehend the global lessons of the pandemic as we enter an age of collective crisis.

Pandemic Poles

Horrific, avoidable deaths from pandemic restriction have catalysed recent protests in China. The Ürümqi fire, killing at least 10 people in an apartment complex under long-term quarantine, was only the latest. In September, a bus crashed killed 27 people in Guiyang, Guizhou Province, on the way to a quarantine centre in the early hours of the morning (Thomas and Abdul Jalil 2022); an unknown number of people are reported to have died after being denied medical treatment for non-Covid related illnesses (Human Rights Watch 2022); not to mention the incidence of suicides during extended lockdown periods (Yang 2022). In the case of the Ürümqi blaze, according to reports, while the fire department arrived within the first 30 minutes, it took them nearly three hours to work their way through the lockdown gates, fences, and security, as well as the parked cars whose batteries were dead (Shepherd and Kuo 2022). Following a long tradition of mourning and political protest in China, the protests started from outrage over these tragic, irrational, and preventable deaths.

These events have gone a long way to unravelling the substantial effort expended by the Chinese Party-State to weave a narrative of pandemic success (Repnikova 2020; Zhang 2020). With its zero covid policy, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has attempted to position itself as the polar opposite of the the West and the United States in particular—a biopolitical state that ‘deploys its governing techniques in the name of defending the security of life against external threats’ (L.G. 2022), which represents a centralised technocratism starkly distinct from the class-based revolutionary politics of the Mao era. Until the emergence of the much more transmissible Omicron variant, the Chinese Government successfully mobilised the population, state, and economy in a concerted effort to suppress transmission through the use of newly developed surveillance technologies aimed at systematically mapping, tracking, and containing the population. In the name of the health of society, the Party-State constructed an elaborate immunitary apparatus, which depended on both public compliance and coercion—the result being low levels of transmission, illness, and death due to the virus.

In stark contrast, in the United States there have been over a million deaths due to Covid-19, many of which ‘took place in 2020 before the vaccines were available’ (Simmons-Duffin and Nakajima 2022). As of 27 November 2022, the United States is still estimating 330.4 deaths from Covid-19 per day (The New York Times 2022). In their recent book on the pandemic, *What World is This?*, Judith Butler (2022) argues that the normalisation of deaths due to Covid-19 means the acceptance of a percentage of the population as disposable—or a society in which ‘mass death among less grievable subjects plays an essential role in maintaining social welfare and public order’ (Lincoln 2021: 46). The fact that the United States is a necropolitical culture is undeniable (one of the authors writes from their home in Colorado Springs where a week ago a gunman murdered five people in a queer nightclub). There is not enough mourning in the world to encompass the deaths in the United States from Covid-19, gun violence (particularly the normalisation of school shootings), police brutality, overdoses, and suicide. It is not an exaggeration to say that the acceptance of cruel, meaningless, and preventable death and debilitating illness—particularly for poorer, racialised, and medically vulnerable segments of the population—has become a key feature of contemporary US culture.

Donald Trump’s May 2020 capitulation that ‘there will be more death’ (Wilkie 2020) indeed does seem to represent the antithesis to China’s commitment to ‘people first, life first’ (人民至上 生命至上). On the surface, this necropolitical/biopolitical binary would seem to be a simple one rooted in contradictory ideological systems: the United States and many other Western countries placed re-opening the economy and resuming a semblance of normalcy over the lives and health of many people; whereas, China has been willing to absorb economic damage to protect the lives of its people. For a time, this comparison served to reinforce the CCP’s legitimisation narratives. China’s technocratic biopolitics supposedly values life as sacrosanct—in the words of Xi Jinping: ‘People only have one life. We must

protect it' (Bram 2022)—versus the United States' necropolitics of inevitability, where the acceptance of irrational death is conceptualised as a requirement for life, liberty, and human flourishing.

However, this seeming bio/necropolitical binary falls apart as soon as one realises that the CCP above all values its own legitimisation, which during the pandemic has hinged on the perception that it values human life. The subsequent bureaucratic implementation of the zero covid policy means that the statistics of cases and containment—that is, the perceived performance of the state—matter more than the actual lives that are being saved. When people visibly suffer or die due to the CCP's pandemic regime, the biopolitical logic begins to unravel. No scene captures this contradiction in a more visceral and painful way than people burning alive while locked inside their own apartments from the outside, as their neighbours watch and record their dying voices begging for help. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with a biopolitical commitment to maintaining life in a pandemic (this is precisely the position we advocate without resorting to authoritarian biopolitics); the problem is that the CCP's overwhelming priority is its own legitimacy, with viral suppression becoming the locus of legitimising narratives during the pandemic. In this sense, the biosecurity embodied in China's response to Covid-19 was less about 'the securing of collective life against risk' (Lincoln 2021: 46), and more about securing the life of the Party.

Life, Liberty, and Party Legitimacy

Consequently, contrasting a rose-tinted view of China's pandemic response with the United States' dismal handling of the disaster sets up a clear false binary. For apologists of China, the narrative almost writes itself: China's initial responses were popular and saved lives. The United States' response was a national funeral pyre, which continues to smoulder at the margins of national attention. All of this is true. However, it is only a partial picture. What is omitted from this narrative is the emerging feeling among Chinese protesters that their lives are trapped within the Party-State's apparatus of legitimisation, the scientific validity and biomedical necessity of which seem increasingly far-fetched. The Party-State has maintained zero covid because it has staked its legitimisation on it, and Xi Jinping's reputation in particular. This can be illustrated clearly by putting the pandemic into the context of the CCP's handling of other disasters.

For instance, in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the CCP insisted that the deaths were due to a 'natural disaster' (自然) and not from a 'man-made catastrophe' (人祸). If it is a natural disaster, the Party appears as the saviour; man made catastrophe, on the other hand, raises questions about responsibility and points to broader systemic issues. Party legitimisation turns on this distinction (Sorace 2017, 2018, 2020, and 2021). The same rationality applies to the pandemic. The only thing standing between the Chinese people and the virus is the CCP—its quarantines, billowy white suits, digital tracking, and the evolving coercive surveillance tools that makes all this possible. The current protests signify the disintegration of this narrative. People are starting to question whether the CCP's zero covid policies are about protecting their lives—as evidence mounts to the contrary—or its own legitimisation. At the level of symbolic inscription, in a flash, China's zero covid has transformed from a positive bio-medical infrastructure into an apparatus of containment and (literary and metaphorical) suffocation.

Our analysis does not predict that the CCP will be unable to reassert discursive control over the public framing of the narrative. It is a powerful 'discursive state', exceptionally talented at metabolising crises into victories (Sorace 2017). One of the key differences between the Sichuan earthquake and today, is that whereas the earthquake was bounded in time and space—restricted to a single region and point in time—the pandemic is an ongoing national crisis with no clear end point.

Although people in China have had different experiences during the pandemic on the basis of their class, ethnicity, gender, and other salient categories (Butler 2022; Friedman 2022; Karl 2022), it remains possible to identify with other people's experiences, and the current wave of protests has even temporarily fostered solidarity between Han and Uyghurs (Millward 2022). Moreover, it is a global and mediated issue, which is why comparisons with a maskless World Cup might, to a degree, exacerbate feelings of negative exceptionalism.

US-China binaries usually get stuck in a Cold War eternal return, or Orientalist otherings, and this one is not different. Depending on where one points the mirror, the reflection yields either statist biopolitics versus anti-state necropolitics or totalitarian control versus freedom—and the conspiratorial far right combines both the Chinese and US governments as two faces of the same medical authoritarianism. Instead, we suggest that the United States and China offer two competing models of pandemic governance, neither of which promote human flourishing. As transnational labour organiser Tobita Chow (2022) put it in a recent tweet: 'The competing nihilisms of the US and Chinese governments when it comes to COVID policy are not the only options.'

Misreading the Protests

So, while the Chinese protesters are demonstrating against the authoritarian pandemic governance they have been subjected to, it would be a profound misreading of the protests to conclude that they are demanding the nihilistic necropolitics of the United States and other Western countries. To put it as unequivocally as possible: the protesters in China and the anti-mask/anti-vaxx protesters in the United States, Canada, and Europe are not the same. Western protests against masks and vaccines are a rejection of our 'shared interdependence', as political theorist Elisabeth Anker puts it. According to Anker, '[t]he COVID warriors practice a freedom to expose others to death, and indeed to be free from them' (2022: 9), with 'them' representing basically anyone outside of their private bubble. The assertion of individual freedom as the right to expose others to harm, and protect a fantasy of invulnerability and indifference to strangers, is neither a universal nor desirable definition of freedom. Chinese protesters' calls for 'freedom' (自由) are both polyvocal and symbolically overdetermined by the context of their inscription. Also it is worth pointing out here that student protesters (as they did in 1989) have been singing The Internationale, illustrating that socialist values are not the monopoly of nominally socialist regimes.

While some protester demands are clearly driven by broader political grievances—for instance, calls for Xi Jinping and the CCP to step down—when it comes to the pandemic response, the protesters are not asking for complete state abdication allowing the virus to decimate the population, but rather a reasonable biopolitical rebalancing. For example, calls to end constant nucleic acid testing and forced relocation to centralised quarantine facilities are sensible and pragmatic; they are not the same as a flat rejection of all biopolitical measures aimed at avoiding runaway viral transmission. All this is to say is that invocations of 'freedom' cannot be abstracted from their context, especially to form some glib pseudo-solidarity of reactionary anti-statism. The leftist commitment to transnational solidarity that we embrace, at a minimum, entails a politics of mutual recognition, listening, and con-textual translation.

This is also not to be confused with the statist-solidarity offered by nominally leftist apologists for non-Western state capitalist regimes, such as the public intellectual Vijay Prashad, who on 28 November posted a selfie on Instagram holding a white piece of paper with "☐ Zero Covid" written on it, clearly an expression of support for the CCP, and a mockery of the white/blank paper protests. The bolded Z provocatively smuggles in support for Russia. The ideological incoherence of his positions is held together by an infantile view of anti-imperialism that any enemies of the United

States actually offer desirable alternatives by virtue of their opposition. This position is utterly insensitive to the settler colonial and carceral operations (and in the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even war crimes) committed by Prashad's preferred allies (which are clearly states, rather than people). With so-called friends like this on the Left, who needs enemies?

It is important to step out of the binary quagmire that people like Vijay Prashad and Charlie Kirk are quite happy to be stuck in. If we only focus on China versus the United States, we miss the fact that many countries around the world sought to suppress the virus and protect vulnerable populations through solidarity-based collective measures, managing to maintain individual freedoms while curtailing the mass spread of illness and death. But a focus on the limited horizon of nation-states themselves is part of the problem.

Towards a Positive Biopolitics

What we are straining toward is a new language of the Left, an articulation of a positive biopolitics that is planetary in scale (Bratton 2021) and can invent new political forms that address our being-in-common (Nancy 2022). As Benjamin Bratton points out: '[P]retending that biopower should not exist, and that choices concerning what does and does not live can be evaded because they are difficult and disturbing, is ultimately another way of allowing biopower to be exercised without accountability' (2021: 5). The positive vision of biopolitics as a solidarity-based, collective endeavour clearly stands in stark contrast to both the nihilistic necropolitics embodied in the corpses that overwhelmed funeral homes in the United States, as well as the dire political realities of capitalist accumulation, political stability, neo-Confucian patriarchy, Han chauvinism, and carcerality that the Chinese state offers today. There are other lineages, names, and debates (Sorace et al. 2019). There are languages we have not yet learned how to speak or listen for. This would also be a language of mourning, which attempts to respond to Judith Butler's haunting question: 'Do any of us know how to name what we have lost?' We have not only lost loved ones, but also the capacity to imagine a world in which all of us flourish. We are not sure of how to proceed, but at least confident that the path forward is not toward a world where either the United States or China define the terms of collective existence.

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