

State Racism, Social Justice, and the COVID-19 Pandemic



Jordan Liz

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Abstract

COVID-19 has exposed the marginalization and discrimination experienced by various groups, including the elderly, the immunocompromised, and the poor, as well as women, racial minorities, and others. Drawing on Michel Foucault's account of state racism and biopower, I examine the ways in which racial and ethnic minorities have been made more vulnerable by the current pandemic. Although the bulk of the article focuses on issues of race, it has important implications for broader thinking about other forms of marginalization and for thinking about ways of achieving social justice on multiple fronts.

1. Introduction

During one of his daily COVID-19 press briefings, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo remarked, "Everyone is subject to this virus. It is the great equalizer. I don't care how smart, how rich, how powerful you think you are. I don't care how young, how old. This virus is the great equalizer."¹ This discourse of equality and togetherness has been common throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. From scientists, politicians, and celebrities the rallying cry has been, "We are all in this together," which serves as an essential reminder that not only does the virus pose a threat to everyone but that only together can we address it.² And, in one way, these remarks are entirely correct. The virus itself is not picking and choosing its hosts based on race, gender, class or any other demographic indicator. Moreover, since the start of the pandemic, everyone's life has been impacted by its social, political, and economic effects. For these reasons, we must band together to stop the spread and "flatten the curve." It is a nice, even uplifting, sentiment in these chaotic times.

However, discourses of equality have a way of being misleading. Since its beginning, the United States has proclaimed itself a nation that stands for liberty and justice for all. A land wherein all could freely pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Yet, this "all" was never inclusive, certainly not of women and racial minorities. Unfortunately, this state of uneven inclusivity persists into the age of COVID-19. It is not the great equalizer. The outbreak has done much to expose the marginalization and discrimination experienced by various groups including the elderly, the immunocompromised, the poor, as well as women, racial minorities, and others.³ In this article, I focus specifically on issues related to race and ethnicity. Since the outbreak's inception, members of the media and politicians, including President Trump, have insisted on referring to COVID-19 as the "China Virus" and/or the "Wuhan Virus." This, in turn, has led to increased discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans.⁴ Moreover, racial disparities in access to COVID-19 treatment as well as deaths have been constant throughout this crisis (e.g., the death rate for Black Chicagoans is six

1. Dan Gardner, "Hate Him or Love Him: New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo Can Teach Us A Lot about How to Speak During a Pandemic," *CNBC*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/06/what-new-york-governor-andrew-cuomo-teaches-us-about-how-to-speak-lead-in-coronavirus-pandemic.html>.

2. António Guterres, "We are all in this Together: Human Rights and COVID-19 Response and Recovery," *United Nations*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/we-are-all-together-human-rights-and-covid-19-response-and>.

3. Martha Henriques, "Why COVID-19 is Different for Men and Women," *BBC*, April 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200409-why-covid-19-is-different-for-men-and-women>; Maryellen Stewart, "Most People Dying from COVID-19 are Old. Don't Treat Them Just as Statistics," *Vox*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/first-person/2020/4/22/21228680/coronavirus-covid-19-deaths-old-elderly-people>.

4. Lauren Aratani, "'Coughing While Asian': Living in Fear as Racism Feeds Off Coronavirus Panic," *The Guardian*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/coronavirus-us-asian-americans-racism>.

times higher than for White Chicagoans).⁵ To examine these issues further, I turn to French philosopher Michel Foucault's account of state racism and biopower. Although the bulk of the article focuses on issues of race, it has important implications for broader thinking about other forms of marginalization and achieving social justice on multiple fronts.

2. Foucault on Biopower and State Racism

To begin, what is biopower? For Foucault, biopower refers to the power over life and death. Historically, this was exercised via the right of the sovereign "to take life or let live."⁶ The sovereign was the monarch, the aristocrats, or, more generally, the centralized political authority of the state. Under their own discretion, the sovereign could seize property, enslave others, and even kill as they chose; those who lived did so only at the whim of the sovereign. According to Foucault, sovereign power has been largely supplanted by biopower in the contemporary period.⁷ Biopower operates via a series of policies and social norms designed to exercise control and regulation over individual bodies and populations. Instead of eliminating life, biopower is concerned with improving, maximizing, and optimizing it.⁸ The modern techniques of biopower may include state-sponsored hygiene and health campaigns, social and cultural norms of cleanliness, as well as regulations on abortion rights and end-of-life care.⁹ Even the current shelter-in-place orders,

social distancing practices, and immigration restrictions fall within the domain of biopower. All of these are intended to maintain the strength and health of society and, in doing so, ensure its longevity.

But, how does the state decide what counts as "optimization?" And, if the purpose of the state is truly to "maximize" life, then why are so many groups currently facing greater hardships and higher rates of death because of the pandemic? For Foucault, "optimizing" life is more than just maximizing the life expectancy or minimizing the risk of disease; it is also concerned with *which* lives are able to survive. Biopower accomplishes this by making distinctions between a "superclass" (or "super race") whose lives are viewed as improving the state, and a "subclass" (or "subrace") who make it worse.¹⁰ Such designations emerge within discourse. As Lara Lessa summarizes, for Foucault, discourse refers to "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak."¹¹ It is a way of systematically socially constructing categories of people. For example, historically, the discourse of sex and sexuality has stipulated that there are two sexes and that heterosexuality is the sexual norm. "Male" and "female," then, are two categories formed by this discourse. These categories are reproduced and maintained by a whole network of practices including governmental documents requiring one to self-identify as either male or female; corporations distinguishing product lines as "masculine" or "feminine"; the media and politicians emphasizing the significance of the nuclear family and even the practice of intersex medical interventions performed on newborns with "ambiguous" or "atypical" genitalia.¹²

Now, for Foucault, discourse does not emerge randomly—it is always intimately tied to pow-

5. Flynn Meagan, "Those Numbers Take Your Breath Away': Covid-19 is Hitting Chicago's Black Neighborhoods Much Harder Than Others, Officials Say," *The Washington Post*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/chicago-racial-disparity-coronavirus/>.

6. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990).

7. Importantly, for Foucault, power never disappears. Whereas exercises of sovereign power may be less frequent nowadays, it still remains an active form of power. For example, sovereign power is still present in capital punishment.

8. Chloë Taylor, "Biopower" in *Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (London, UK: Routledge, 2014).

9. Ladelle McWhorter, *Racial and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009).

10. Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

11. Lara Lessa, "Discursive Struggles within Social Welfare: Restaging Teen Motherhood," *The British Journal of Social Work* 36, no. 2 (2006): 283-98, 285.

12. Anne-Fausto Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

er.¹³ As he writes in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, “the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used. Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality.”¹⁴ Within biopower, the two-sex model and heterosexuality are seen as mechanisms by which to “optimize” and “maximize” the population—they become the norm or “superclass” against which all bodies are judged. As such, those falling outside the norm are not simply statistical outliers but rather are considered an existential threat to the normal population. Within this discourse, they are “abnormals” or “denigrates” that threaten the longevity of the nation. Part of the task of optimization, then, is to mitigate the threat these “abnormal” populations pose, whether abroad or domestically. But, how can a state designed to promote life ever justify killing? For Foucault it achieves this in two ways: One, it can either justify violence by designating a population as a threat to the state (e.g., police violence during the War on Drugs or military action during the War on Terror). Or, two, it can decide to “disallow [life] to the point of death.”¹⁵ For Foucault, most residents and citizens nowadays are not killed by state executions. Rather, they die because the state fails to protect their lives, whether by failing to provide medical coverage or safe neighborhoods, or even by designating a group as a threat or menace to society. All these actions increase the group’s likelihood of dying.

Biopower kills via a system of exclusion and vulnerability. To establish these systems, Foucault argues, the state must become racist.

13. As Foucault explains in “Two Lectures,” “In a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association” (93).

14. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 147.

15. *Ibid.*, 138.

As Chloë Taylor explains, “biopower is almost necessarily racist, since racism, broadly constructed, is an ‘indispensable precondition’ that grants the state the power to kill. Under such conditions, eradicating sub-groups of that population is perceived as a justifiable form of managing and protecting a people.”¹⁶ Importantly, this is not exclusively an ethnic racism, but a “state racism” or “racism against the abnormal.”¹⁷ This involves labelling groups as inferior and dangerous, whether due to their race/ethnicity, sexuality, sex/gender, class, etc. On this construal, the stereotyping of Black people as “criminals,” of Hispanics as “illegal immigrants,” of Muslims as “terrorists,” and of Asians as “COVID-19 carriers” is racist. So too are the comments made by Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick regarding letting some people, mostly the elderly, die for the sake of “reopening” the country.¹⁸ In each case, labelling like this amounts to willingly designating a specific population as less desirable (or undesirable) in order to protect the state. As such, whereas sovereign power was the right to “take life and let live,” the objective of the state now is to “to make live or let die.”¹⁹

3. COVID-19 and State Racism

The COVID-19 pandemic has served to both expose existing practices of state racism, as well as institute new forms. With regards to racial and ethnic minorities, perhaps the clearest example is the increase of anti-Asian racism.

16. Chloë Taylor, “Biopower” in *Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (London: Routledge, 2014), 50.

17. Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 255; Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003), 316.

18. Felicia Sonmez, “Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick Comes Under Fire for Saying Seniors Should ‘Take a Chance’ on their Lives for Sake of Grandchildren During Coronavirus Crisis,” *Washington Post*, March 24, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/texas-lt-gov-dan-patrick-comes-under-fire-for-saying-seniors-should-take-a-chance-on-their-own-lives-for-sake-of-grandchildren-during-coronavirus-crisis/2020/03/24/e6f64858-6de6-11ea-b148-e4ce3fbd85b5_story.html.

19. Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 241.

Between March and May 2020, the New York City Commission on Human Rights reported a ninety-two percent increase in incidences of anti-Asian discrimination, compared to the same three-month period the year prior.²⁰ Similarly, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council collected approximately 1,700 reports of racist incidents against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders between mid-March and early May.²¹ Such high rates of anti-Asian racism have been largely credited to the constant and deliberate mislabeling of COVID-19 as the “China Virus” or the “Wuhan Virus.” This anti-Asian discourse has served to promote the false view that all Chinese and Chinese American people are likely carriers of the novel coronavirus.²² Moreover, it has been criticized as reactivating a similar anti-Asian discourse from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. During that period, public health experts and politicians depicted Asian immigrations as “filthy” and “disease ridden” carriers of a whole host of infectious diseases, including smallpox, leprosy, malaria, and bubonic plague.²³ In both instances, Asian and Asian American identities are represented in discourse as a menace to public health—as populations whose very presence endanger the health and safety of the state. They are reconstructed as threats that must be expelled.

Despite this, its defenders have alleged that the phrase is meant to hold the Chinese government accountable²⁴ for not alerting the global

20. Nydia Han, “I Don’t Scare Easily, But COVID-19 Virus of Hate Has Me Terrified: Reporter’s Notebook,” *ABC News*, May 23, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/asian-americans-covid-19-racism-virus-hate-reporters/story?id=70810109>.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil, “Asian Americans Report Over 650 Racist Acts Over Last Week, New Data Says,” *NBC News*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/asian-americans-report-nearly-500-racist-acts-over-last-week-n1169821>.

23. Joan B. Trauner, “The Chinese as Medical Scapegoats in San Francisco, 1870-1905,” *California History* 57, no. 1(1978): 70-87; Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001).

24. Aila Slisco, “Trump Reelection Campaign Asks for 10,000 Donations to Help President ‘Hold China Accountable for Their Lies,’” *Newsweek*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/trump-reelection-campaign-asks-10000-donations-help-president-hold-china-accountable-their-lies-1497906>.

community about the virus sooner. Legislation has even been proposed, such as the Stop COVID Act, which would allow US-Americans to sue the Chinese government for damages incurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁵ This discourse has been further exacerbated by the political rhetoric of China as a hostile, communist country. In this way, the country of China has been designated as a threat to the health and survival of the United States. Such designations have also been applied to the Chinese people. As Senator Tom Cotton claimed in a Fox News interview, the United States is currently training China’s “brightest minds,” only to have them return to China and further their scientific and technological progress. In response, he argued that, “We need to take a very hard look at the visas that we give the Chinese nationals to come to the United States to study, especially in the post-graduate level in advanced scientific and technological fields.”²⁶ Here, the Chinese people are rendered potential enemies who take educational opportunities away from U.S. citizens; and then, return to China to “compete” with and “defeat” the United States. In this way, they weaken the state, and so they must be excluded—under biopower, China and its people are now threats. Citizenship, however, is an unobservable characteristic; so, Chinese Americans, and Asian-Americans more broadly, become entangled in this anti-China discourse. Although Asians are often portrayed as “model minorities,” as Emily Lee argues, within the United States, they are considered “forever foreigners.”²⁷ That is, while the achievements of Asian Americans might be praised by politicians and the media, Asian Americans are viewed as never truly assimilating.

25. Jason Hall, “Sen. Blackburn, Others Introduce Act to Hold China Accountable for Coronavirus Spread,” *Fox17 Nashville*, May 4, 2020, <https://fox17.com/news/local/sen-blackburn-others-introduce-act-to-hold-china-accountable-for-coronavirus-spread>.

26. David Matthew, “Sen. Tom Cotton Wants to Ban Chinese Students from Studying Science in the US,” *NY Daily News*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.nydailynews.com/coronavirus/ny-coronavirus-tom-cotton-ban-chinese-students-studying-in-us-20200426-uib4wzmjargufflazdgcg4jmfy-story.html>.

27. Emily Lee, “Model Minorities” in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, eds. Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2019), 235.

ing into US-American culture.²⁸ They remain Asian first and US-American second. As a racialized Other, their protection is always highly contingent.

Unsurprisingly, other racial groups have likewise experienced COVID-19-related racism. On behalf of the Association of Black Cardiologists, Norrissa Haynes, Lisa Cooper, and Michelle Albert find that, in the United States, there are higher rates of hospitalization, death, and positive cases of COVID-19 among Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans.²⁹ Moreover, according to the CDC, because Black and Brown communities tend to be more densely populated, it is more difficult for them to practice social distancing. Such communities also tend to be farther away from grocery stores and medical facilities, thereby making it more difficult to seek medical care and/or purchase enough food to remain at home for long periods of time.³⁰ Additionally, the CDC notes that essential workers are disproportionately nonwhite: Hispanics constitute approximately fifty-three percent of agricultural workers; and Blacks compromise thirty percent of licensed prac-

tical and vocational nurses.³¹ In each of these cases, the vulnerability of communities of color is the byproduct of a series of legal precedents and social practices, most notably discrimination in healthcare and employment, as well as the legacy of residential segregation. All of these factors have created a system wherein Black and Brown people experience higher rates of unemployment, mass incarceration, chronic medical issues, and homelessness, as well as less access to housing in safe neighborhoods and reliable healthcare.³² Over time, these conditions are normalized via a series of discourses. For example, the discourse of the “ghetto” normalizes the poverty and violence of predominately Black and Brown populations.³³ The discourse of the “lazy,” “rude” and “criminal” minority normalizes incarceration and high unemployment rates.³⁴ Even medical discourses that purport Black people are more tolerant of pain serve to normalize the lower quality of healthcare provided to them.³⁵ Those discourses and others like them serve to make these networks of marginalization into expected outcomes (e.g., we expect more violence in the “ghetto” because it is the “ghetto”). In doing so, we not only ignore the causes for those outcomes but create conditions wherein communities of color are constantly and disproportionately exposed to harm and even death.

28. It is also worth mentioning that the “myth of the model minority” serves an important function within biopower. By emphasizing the success of a non-White racial group, the state is able to minimize its responsibility for the social, political, and economic inequalities between White and Black people. Shifting attention away from the structural and institutional realities of anti-Black racism, the “model minority” myth serves to further marginalize and victimize Black people. Kat Chow, “‘Model Minority’ Myth Again Used as a Racial Wedge Between Asians and Blacks,” *NPR*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/19/524571669/model-minority-myth-again-used-as-a-racial-wedge-between-asians-and-blacks>.

29. Norrissa Haynes, Lisa A. Cooper, and Michelle A. Albert, “At the Heart of the Matter: Unmasking and Addressing COVID-19’s Toll on Diverse Populations,” *Circulation* (Preprint), May 4, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.120.048126>.

30. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,” CDC, April 22, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>.

31. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “COVID-19 in Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups,” CDC, April 22, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>.

32. Stacey Patton, “The Pathology of American Racism Is Making the Pathology of the Coronavirus Worse,” *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/11/coronavirus-black-america-racism/>.

33. Eduardo Mendieta, “Plantations, Ghettos, Prisons: US Racial Geographies,” *Philosophy & Geography* 7, no. 1 (2004): 43-59.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Kelly M. Hoffman, Sophie Trawalter, Jordan R. Axt, and M. Norman Oliver, “Racial Bias in Pain Assessment and Treatment Recommendations, and False Beliefs about Biological Differences between Blacks and Whites,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 113, no. 16 (2016): 4296-301.

4. State Racism and Social Justice

To these issues, Foucault's account of state racism offers an important insight—namely, that, at its core, the issue is vulnerability. While it may manifest itself differently among the various nonwhite racial groups, marginalization of other populations is tied to their designation as a subrace population. Moreover, while the focus of this article has been ethnic racism, Foucault's account is broader. Ageism against the elderly, ableism against the immunocompromised, and sexism against women are all acts of state racism. As such, state racism can serve as a fulcrum for social justice initiatives based around what Myisha Cherry refers to as “vulnerable solidarity.” As she writes, “Vulnerable solidarity is solidarity that is formed based on the vulnerability that we all face as citizens to be targeted and/or affected by state racism and state violence.”³⁶ While the threat is actualized in the case of the subrace, its possibility extends to everyone. After all, the subrace is not a biologically or historically permanent population, it shifts depending on who the state designates as dangerous. During the late nineteenth century, Asians were considered “disease ridden.” Then, between the 1940s and 60s, the Asian and Asian American identity was reconstructed around the “myth of model minority” that proved the “American Dream” was achievable by all.³⁷ Their former stigma was

36. Myisha Cherry, “State Racism, State Violence and Vulnerable Solidarity” in *The Oxford Handbook on Philosophy and Race*, eds. Naomi Zack (New York: Oxford UP, 2017), 360.

37. As Emily Lee explains, during the 1940-60s, the United States had great need for high-skill laborers. To meet this demand, the United States repealed its immigration restrictions to allow skilled laborers from Asian countries, mostly China and Japan, to enter the country. The success of these immigrants and their offspring established the “myth of the model minority.” However, as Lee notes, “The success of the children of this immigrant population cannot be conceptualized as the success of the children of manual laborers economically climbing into the middle class; instead they were the children of middle-class professionals maintaining their parents’ class status.” Emily Lee, “Model Minorities” in *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, eds. Gail Weiss, Ann V. Murphy, and Gayle Salamon, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2019), 231.

largely erased. Now, those stigmas have resurfaced and with them a new wave of anti-Asian racism. Importantly, the only difference here is the discourse surrounding them. As Foucault argues, changes in discourse change how bodies and subjectivities are constructed and therefore how they are perceived and understood by others.³⁸ The case of Asian Americans and COVID-19 illustrates not only how devastating shifts in discourse can be under biopower but the ease with which they can occur.

To emphasize, under biopower, any population can be designated as a threat, including White people, such as those deemed “race traitors” for defending the rights of Black people or, currently, those White US-Americans being denied a stimulus check because they are married to an undocumented immigrant.³⁹ In the latter case, their exclusion is a byproduct of the current anti-immigration, nationalist discourse popularized and disseminated by conservative politicians and media. Reflecting on this is significant because it highlights how discourses targeting one specific group may have negative effects on others. Because the boundaries between normality and abnormality are fluid under biopower, concentrating solely on protecting the rights of one's own group is insufficient. The lines separating one group from one another—the categories and identities that privilege some while marginalizing others—are all merely the byproducts of discourse. All of us may become subject to state racism. Because of this, we all have a vested interest in collectively resisting it.

For Foucault, while it is impossible to completely eradicate power relations, resistance is always possible. As he put it, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a po-

38. Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777-95.

39. Sarah Kolinovsky, “Some 1.2 Million Americans Won't Get Stimulus Checks Because They're Married to Immigrants,” *ABC News*, May 5, 2020, <https://abc-news.go.com/Politics/12-million-americans-stimulus-checks-married-immigrants/story?id=70493620>; Nicole Narea, “US Citizen Spouses and Children of Unauthorized Immigrants Were Shut Out of Stimulus Relief. Now They're Suing,” *Vox*, May 6, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/6/21248074/immigrant-citizen-spouse-children-coronavirus-stimulus-checks>.

sition of exteriority in relation to power.”⁴⁰ In other words, power and resistance go hand-in-hand.⁴¹ This entails examining sites of vulnerability because in them we can understand how power operates and impacts marginalized populations within our society. The present pandemic offers many examples that highlight the differences between the state’s response towards Whites and nonwhites. For instance, many have noted that the “reopen” protests, which have been predominately attended by Whites, have met far less police presence and violence than protests consisting of mostly people of color. As Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib put it, “Black people get executed by police for just existing, while white people dressed like militia members carrying assault weapons are allowed to threaten State Legislators and staff.”⁴² The irony of the racial divide of the “reopen” protests is that many people of color do not have the luxury of sheltering-in-place. As Kailee Scale, the managing director of Black Lives Matter Global Network, put it, Black people “are the essential workers that keep the country going; we are the mail carriers, delivery personnel, transportation providers, and

40. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 95.

41. This raises the question of whether it is possible to completely eradicate state racism. For Foucault, state racism and “racism against the abnormal” all emerge within biopower, which is itself a historically and socially contingent form of power. As such, state racism, in its current configuration, can be largely minimized in the same way that sovereign power has been largely supplanted by biopower. Nevertheless, there will always be power, and so there will always be resistance. While this may entail that a utopian society is likely unachievable, a more equitable and fair society remains possible. As Foucault writes, “The problem, then, is not to try to dissolve them [power relations] in the utopia of perfectly transparent communication, but to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the *ēthos*, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible.” Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics, Truth and Subjectivity* (Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol 1), ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 298.

42. Bryan Armen Graham, “‘Swastikas and Nooses’: Governor Slams ‘Racism’ of Michigan Lockdown Protest,” *The Guardian*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/03/michigan-gretchen-whitmer-lockdown-protest-racism>.

hospital workers. We cannot just #stayhome.”⁴³ Within the current regime of biopower, state protections for (most) Whites and state racism for people of color go hand-in-hand.

But, what does Foucauldian resistance look like? At its core, the goal of such resistance is twofold: first, minimizing the hardships being experienced by nonwhite and other marginalized groups; and second, to ultimately change the discourse and power relations that makes these groups vulnerable to state racism. Such resistance can take multiple forms. For example, in May 2020, the NAACP launched its #WeAreDoneDying campaign to expose the systems of vulnerability and abuse rampant across US-American society and in particular its healthcare system.⁴⁴ Likewise, openly advocating for more protections and medical resources being provided to nonwhite communities, as well as highlighting the essential role people of color play in our society, are useful forms of resistance. Moreover, self-directed responses that emphasize care are crucial. As Camara Phyllis Jones, a former president of the American Public Health Association, argues, within communities of color “we need to create loose care networks” by strategizing with family, church, and community members.⁴⁵ Given their designation as members of a “sub-race” population, racial minorities can hardly rely on state protections. As such, collective action will be needed to ensure that their limited resources work to meet the needs of their communities.

Importantly, not only do such initiatives provide immediate support, but they also serve to prevent the racial disparities of COVID-19 from being normalized and rationalized un-

43. Kailee Scales, “Black Lives Matter Global Network Responses to COVID-19 Ethnicity Data,” *Blacks Lives Matter*, April 9, 2020, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/black-lives-matter-global-network-responses-to-covid-19-ethnicity-data/>.

44. NAACP, “NAACP Launches #WeAreDoneDying Campaign, Empowering Black and Brown Communities to Take Action Against Senseless Killings of African Americans,” *NAACP*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.naacp.org/latest/naacp-launches-wearedone-munities-demand-equitable-action-amid-covid-19/>.

45. Hilary Beard, “The Color of Coronavirus,” *The Philadelphia Citizen*, March 25, 2020. <https://thephiladelphiacitizen.org/people-of-color-coronavirus/>.

der colorblind discourses. For example, when asked about the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the Black community in Louisiana, Senator Bill Cassidy explained that the “fundamental reason” was the high rate of diabetes within the population.⁴⁶ When asked about the impact of systematic racism, he replied that, “Well, you know, that’s rhetoric, and it may be. But as a physician, I’m looking at science.”⁴⁷ He went on to argue that the best way of tackling the problem, “no matter your race,” was to address the problems of obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.⁴⁸ Others have attempted to normalize the racial disparities of COVID-19 as a failure of personal responsibility. Lovely Warren, the mayor of Rochester, NY, and the second vice president of the African American Mayors Association, noted that she didn’t “think our [the Black] community is taking it [COVID-19] as seriously as it should.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Representative Marc Veasey of Fort Worth, TX, explained that, “I just want people to take this seriously, particularly in the African American community where we already have disproportionate underlying issues such as heart disease and diabetes. You couple that with a lackadaisical approach to social distancing and it can be deadly, as we’re seeing around the country. We need for our community to take this seriously.”⁵⁰ Notably, the effects of state racism are either undermined or ignored entirely. As Ibram X. Kendi, the Director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, writes, “To explain the disparities in the mortality rate, too many politicians and commentators are noting that Black people have more underlying medical conditions but,

46. David Greene, “Sen. Bill Cassidy on His State’s Racial Disparities in Coronavirus Deaths,” *NPR*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/07/828715984/sen-bill-cassidy-on-his-states-racial-disparities-in-coronavirus-deaths>.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. Deborah Barfield, “Why Are So Many Black People Dying from Coronavirus?,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20200408/why-are-so-many-black-people-dying-from-coronavirus>.

50. Stefan Stevenson and Nichole Manna, “Fort Worth Congressman Calls Out Black Community After Large Gatherings Amid Coronavirus,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.star-telegram.com/news/special-reports/article241880466.html>.

crucially, they’re *not explaining why*. Or they blame the choices made by black people, or poverty, or obesity—but not racism.”⁵¹ The erasure of the effects of state racism, along with the normalization of racial disparities under discourses of health and personal responsibility, serve to maintain the vulnerability of people of color under biopower. To achieve social justice, such normalizations must be resisted.

Ultimately, Foucault’s account pushes us to establish broad coalitions spanning across different forms of marginalization and oppression from sexism to xenophobia to ethnic racism to ableism to homophobia, among many others. Additionally, it calls upon those in the super class (or super race) to recognize the fragility of their own privilege and their own potential vulnerability to state racism. Perhaps the strongest aspect of Foucault’s account is the recognition that everyone is susceptible to state violence and racism. COVID-19 provides us ample evidence of how quickly social status and privilege can shift with changes in discourse. As such, despite the hardship, COVID-19 may serve as an important moment for social justice and change.

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51. Ibram X. Kendi, “Stop Blaming Black People for Dying of the Coronavirus,” *The Atlantic*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/race-and-blame/609946/> (author’s emphasis).

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Contributor Information

Jordan Liz is an assistant professor of Philosophy at San José State University, where he specializes in the philosophy of race, philosophy of medicine and biomedical ethics.

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