

What do States do? The State and a Politics of Alienation.

Introduction

Foucault proposes an alternative conception of state power, arising from a transformation in the eighteenth century, one that rests not on juridical prohibition and the negative force of a law that ‘says no,’ that is sovereign power, but instead on a power that is productive and positive: ‘it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, and produces discourse’ (‘Eye of Power’ 119). This technology of power, which Foucault illustrates by the Panoptic model, is not enacted, that is limited, by the state as a sovereign entity but instead is wielded by the very subjects it produces and in turn disciplines – against themselves and others. The panopticon, and the modern politics of the state, works by creating a field of ‘isolating visibility’ and ‘exact legibility’ where subjects are placed and managed in categories: from colonized object to colonizing subject, from citizen to refugee to extra-legal prisoner to the conditional and politically devalued subject of the migrant (Foucault, ‘Eye of Power’ 147, 154). The essential activity of the state here becomes the creation and application of these categories of life, by which the state interpellates and valorises some bodies while ignoring and misrecognising others. It is in this tradition that I would like to further propose that the modern state not only interpellates but also *alienates* life.

I will begin by introducing Foucault’s panoptic tower as a technology and metaphor of individual alienation and by exploring the ways in which the modern state categorises, interpellates, and separates bodies horizontally before arguing that the state creates a fundamental alienation between the ‘political being’ and the ‘human being.’ This alienation undergirds these other categories that act on life, by distinguishing between lives who receive protection on the basis of politics from those that instead can only rely on their ‘humanness.’ This alienation also means that individuals instead of experiencing the other as a particular human being instead find their relations mediated by politics, where I will reveal cosmopolitanism as an ‘aesthetic’ insufficient to confer real protection to those outside of politics. Instead, through *praxis*, I will propose and advocate a different kind of horizontal relation between individuals, one that is not isolating and alienating but is built of mutual intersubjective understanding and located in the everyday world.

The Panoptic Tower

Foucault presents the plague town of ideal disciplinary power that 'lays out for each individual his place' through 'multiple separations' and 'individualizing distributions' and argues this is what took place in institutions – from schools, to prisons, to hospitals – in the nineteenth century ('Panopticism' 2). However, Foucault next introduces a new technology of power, Bentham's panopticon, that is characterized by 'isolating *visibility*': 'each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible' ('Eye of Power' 147; 'Panopticism' 3). The panopticon comprises a guard tower in the centre of a ring of facing prison cells, where the tower's guard can look into any given cell at any given time – however, its strength is that it never needs to. Instead 'this field of total visibility' will prevent 'even the possibility of wrongdoing' (Foucault, 'Eye of Power' 153). Each prisoner will internalize the gaze so that he 'becomes his own overseer' and exercises 'this surveillance over, and against, himself' (Foucault, 'Eye of Power' 155). This power and its exercise that is 'permanent, exhaustive, and omnipresent' is dependent not on any one overbearing individual or a top-down structure but instead is relational and exercised horizontally between individuals (Foucault, 'Panopticism' 3, 9). Foucault argues the panoptic method of control has become 'deinstitutionalised' and emerged from its 'closed fortress' so that it now circulates freely and flexibly as a method of control ('Panopticism' 8); however, I would like to push an understanding of each individual, being both subject to and a wielder of panoptic control, being highly visible yet also separated and isolated, as being in their own individualized 'panoptic tower.' In other words, the panopticon is deinstitutionalized in so far as it has become manifest in individuals themselves. This internalization and individualization of disciplinary power is not only a technology of power but also a mode of alienation – from ourselves and from the surrounding world. If as Jaeggi argues, we only realise ourselves through engagement with the world and our relations with others in it, the panoptic position is to be 'outside' of these relations (134). We can apply what Thomas Nagel terms, 'the view from nowhere' or for Bernard Williams, '*sub specie aeternitas*,' where the individual holds an objective god's eye view over others and himself in his 'field of visibility' but this view is 'nonsituated' and 'external' rather than bound up within, that is 'inside,' meaningful relations (Jaeggi 135-136). If for Foucault this kind of panoptic visibility is isolating, it is equally alienating, for it denies the self-regulating individual the possibility to 'make' and 'become' themselves within the subjective world.

Modernity/Coloniality

Fanon reminds us that alienation is not just an ontological or subjective problem of 'individual fulfilment;' rather for many racialized bodies, political institutions and structures directly prevent individuals from self-realisation and even deny their subjecthood (Ndlovu 2-3). Alienation, for Fanon, is another way to describe the 'colonial despair' of black subjects who have been denied subjectivity and humanhood (Ndlovu 7). Mignolo also reminds us that modernity is inherently wound up with coloniality: as much as the modern capitalist economy, facilitated by the state, introduced the ability to 'reproduce its resources indefinitely,' it also created a 'dispensability (or expendability) of human life' (3, 6). Where Foucault describes the panopticon as a technology of power, Mignolo describes Quijano's colonial matrix, 'a four-headed and two-legged monster,' that undergirds coloniality and provides the logic to categorise and devalue certain kinds of human life (3, 8). For Mignolo, coloniality and its management of bodies in four intersecting domains, ranging from economy to sexuality, is the 'missing complimentary half of biopolitics' and it is one that transcends any one individual actor so that it is the matrix itself 'that has managed the actors and all of us' (14, 16). Todorov moreover contrasts the colonial logic of Spanish America under Cortes and Las Casas against that of enslavement, where if enslavement reduced subjects to 'the status of an object,' colonialism created an 'intermediary subject,' that is a 'subject-producer-of-objects,' who is given greater care, like education and medical treatment, only in so far as to be more effective in producing goods (175-6). These individuals are still 'kept from becoming like ourselves' (Todorov 176). This colonial logic denies them the conditions for self-realization on their own terms beyond the state's sole recognition of their economic position as producers of objects.

If modernity is inseparable and in fact diffused with and supported by this colonial managerial logic, 'high-modernist faith' for Scott similarly rests on principles of 'legibility' and 'manipulation,' where state intervention for the sake of the protection of property, the law, medical care, education, and tax all entails visibility and categorization: that subjects be 'identified, observed, recorded, counted, aggregated, and monitored' (*Seeing Like a State* 183). This omnipresent categorisation of individual bodies, for the sake of providing biopolitical care, is what Scott means by 'seeing like a state.' What the modern state does, as Foucault writes, is assign 'each individual [their] place' – and Mignolo's 'darker side' of modernity: coloniality is a powerful reminder that this categorisation is differentiated and of the tangible impact it has on physical bodies, bodies construed by the state so as to be denied

rights and protection, protection not only in a negative sense but also in a productive, self-realising sense (Foucault, 'Panopticism' 3; Mignolo 2).

Recognition and Interpellation

Inherent to Todorov's conception of colonial logic is the state's recognition of colonized subjects only in so far as their economic utility. This recognition, like other modes of categorisation by the state, in the tradition of Althusser, is an act of interpellation – it not only identifies subjects but constitutes them in the process (Bassel 295). Interpellation, however, by the state and its 'ideological state apparatuses' can also create a disjuncture in subjects whose recognition by the state instead feels like misrecognition (Bassel 296). For instance, Bassel illustrates the disjuncture between the claims of Somali refugee women seeking protection from the French state and access to its politics and a French state that has interpellated these women as instead in foremost need of religious 'liberation' in the public sphere through policies of French secularism (312). The French state in this example chose which aspects of their identities were to be prioritised in the public sphere and from which aspects of violence they most deserved state protection (Bassel 313). This (mis)identification not only recognised Somali women only in so far as the discourse of religious accommodation, that is it is a 'thin' and partial recognition, but it is also one that denies another kind of recognition, that is access to politics through refugee status.

Althusser more generally explains interpellation through the figure of a man walking down the street who is identified by the police as 'hey, you there!' and subsequently turns around, recognising that identification and thus becoming the subject of that hail (Bassel 295).

Althusser however does not explain *why* the subject turns around. Here Butler offers a more forceful reading: the figure of the policeman represents the very call and force of the law to interpellate and identify subjects (Davis 885). However, Davis pushes us to see the figure of the policeman not as a manifestation of sovereign power and its negative law but instead as an 'Everyman' – one who is wound up in horizontal mutually constitutive social relations (894). Davis employs Foucault's concept of productive power, one that the individual is not subjected to, but rather, I'd like to argue in the tradition of the panopticon, a power that is in turn internalised and individualised (894). Interpellation, and its categorisation and constitution of subjects horizontally, can be considered a mode of panoptic power. All interpellation, moreover, carries with it the possibility for misrecognition, if we remember that subjects are 'caught up in an 'imaginary' relation to other people and the social whole'

(Birdwell 315). If, as Jaeggi explains, individuals can only realise themselves through and within their relations to the world and others, these kinds of ‘imaginary’ relations and structures, can also in Marxist sense, take on a life of their own and ‘rule’ over subjects, dehumanising and alienating them so that ‘people no longer experience themselves as active human agents in conscious control of their life circumstances’ (Schweitzerr 27). The act of interpellation and the categorisation of individuals always carries its own constitutive dark side: alienation.

The ‘Political Being’ and the ‘Human Being’

It is in this tradition of omnipresent categorization and constitution that the state creates a fundamental alienation – on both the individual self and in our relations with others – by separating the subjective category of ‘human being’ from ‘political being.’ Richard Sennett, in discussing the effects of a new flexible and unbounded capitalism and the alienating impact of this new political economy on ourselves as ‘social creatures’ through its deskilling and devaluing of workers, equally formulates this contemporary feeling of disjuncture as a question: ‘can we, through political means, provide people with a sense that they are worthwhile and necessary and consequent human beings?’ (4).

Aristotle formulates his own separation between the ‘good life,’ the political life of citizens as opposed to, and in fact surpassing, ‘the necessities of sheer life,’ that is biological life (Arendt 36-37). Agamben draws a similar distinction between ‘politically qualified life’ and the ‘bare life’ of subjects without access to politics and the protection of the law (7). For Arendt, the modern age has bridged the divide between these two aspects of life: the ‘*zoe*’ and the ‘*polis*’, so that the state deals in and is directly concerned with the management of life, what Foucault describes as biopolitics; Agamben calls this collapse the ‘politicisation of bare life’ (Arendt 33; Agamben 3-4). If the modern state has collapsed this divide, I am referring to a third category that is neither the political being nor the biological ‘bare’ being but instead is the ‘human being.’ Sennett’s question implies that this kind of human self-fulfilment is itself synonymous with and only realised by the domain of politics; however, what of the bodies rendered ‘bare’ and denied access to the state’s politics? The bodies that can only rely on their ‘humanness’ for recognition by others that they deserve rights and protection? Arendt, by focusing on the body of the refugee, highlights the paradox of the ‘rights of man’ as the ‘rights of the rightless,’ those who having been denied the rights of citizens in the national community are only human beings (Ranciere 62-63). The state creates

a paradoxical distinction between political beings and human beings, where the latter through exclusion from politics are denied the rights seemingly promised on the basis of ‘humanness’ but in reality are conferred on a political one. This distinction not only tangibly impacts bodies denied political rights and protection but also creates an alienation across *all* subjects whose relations to others in the world are ‘always-already’ mediated by politics rather than facilitated by shared humanness. Ranciere highlights the essential problematic in Arendt’s paradox – that the ‘man’ of the ‘rights of man’ is an abstraction rather than an active subject, and one which we tie to citizenship as a bounded category, as a sphere of politics separate from other aspects of life (63, 68). Politics, for Ranciere, is thus a border continually separating forms of life from each other (68). The state acts by placing such a political border directly on individuals, where, by creating an artificial divide between the universal political being and the other as a particular human being, individuals experience separation from the other and the responsibility owed to them.

For instance, Gregory applies Butler’s conceptual distinction of livable lives and thus grievable lives from those ‘already lost’ and thus both more expendable and less grievable to Afghan civilian casualties during United States (US) humanitarian missions. The US utilized the rhetoric of humanitarianism – yet failed to keep track of and report all-too-high civilian casualties as a result of their mission (Gregory 328). Gregory writes that civilian lives became ‘disposable in the quest to make them livable once again’ (328). Civilians under the restrictive Taliban regime, which denied the conditions that the US believed were necessary for a ‘meaningful and livable life,’ were constructed as only ‘potential humans’ and as ‘already dead’ (Gregory 335-337). These lives in this logic would only ‘count’ *after* their political liberation. The emphasis on ‘human’ rights justifying the mission was in practice secondary to the value which would be given to their lives once ‘liberated’ as political beings.

Cosmopolitanism as an ‘Aesthetic’

The US missions in Afghanistan reveal humanitarianism and human rights as a ‘thin discourse’ that is not sufficient to confer real protection without the force of politics behind it. If Harvey characterizes capitalist postmodernity by the rise of aesthetics over ethics, where, for instance, the poor are ‘aestheticized’ as ‘a passive depiction of otherness, alienation and contingency within the human condition,’ liberalism, and its promise of cosmopolitanism, can similarly be problematized as an aesthetic (336-7). Liberalism relies on

the human being as an abstraction, one whose universality is a fiction, and one who has ‘lost touch with all human specificity’ (Schweitzer 134). The liberal individual, disciplined to be autonomous, instead is separated from the world, and denied the possibility for self-realisation through interaction with a world of *particular* human beings (Murer, ‘Myth of Autonomy’ 146).

Zakin conceptualizes the dilemma in this way: ‘the quest for human solidarity devoid of finite spatiotemporal loyalties and released from the constraints and contingencies of political identification,’ that is a cosmopolitanism predicated on a shared sense of ‘humanness’ rather than bounded by the sphere of politics, ‘seems to inevitably lead only inward’ (69). The subject when confronted with the thin aesthetic and discourse of liberal cosmopolitanism, rather than participating in worldly intersubjective interaction with the other instead experiences Arendt’s ‘world alienation,’ a retreat from the particular to the objective universal and a retreat from intersubjective relations to interiorization (Zakin 65). The alienated individual becomes stuck in the panoptic tower with its objective, isolating view rather than engaging with the other horizontally in a mutual relation.

Engaging the Other through Active *Praxis*

If the promise of cosmopolitanism is a thin one, *praxis*, as an ‘individual’s ethics,’ can become the means to escape isolating alienation (Murer, ‘Asking for More’ 43). *Praxis* is a conscious practice involving the self, the world, and our place within it: it overcomes alienation through the act of participation (Murer, ‘Asking for More’ 43, 47). *Praxis* is in direct opposition to the ‘objectifying hegemonic discourse’ we experience as world alienation and is instead about an ‘understanding of human subjectivity,’ where the self is developed through interaction and social engagement (Murer, ‘Myth of Autonomy’ 133). It is in this philosophy of *praxis* that Rosa Luxemburg proposes the Great Republic and the ‘democracy of the everyday,’ as opposed to the bounded ‘general’ democracy of the bourgeois that takes place only in isolated times and spaces like the voting booth (Murer, ‘Asking for More’ 46). Luxemburg’s Great Republic is instead an ‘open space’ where politics is about lived experience and spontaneity and it requires constant participation everywhere and at all times (Murer, ‘Asking for More’ 47).

The kind of political *praxis* Luxemburg advocates closely resembles Orange’s everyday clinical conception of hermeneutics as ‘dialogical understanding,’ that is an understanding

born through dialogue with the other which is always ‘in progress’ and ‘becomes a shared project’ (Orange 3, 5). It is about an ‘intersubjective search for truth’ through ‘hermeneutic play’ located foremost in experience rather than located internally in the mind (Orange 13). Hermeneutics proposes that we can only understand the other – and thus ourselves – through engagement, the kind of engagement where ‘we place ourselves at risk and allow the other to make an impact on us, to teach us, to challenge our preconceptions and habitual ways of being, to change us for their sake’ (Orange 23). Orange revealingly quotes Gadamer in describing ‘genuine conversation’ as not that which we intend to have but rather as something which we spontaneously ‘fall into’ (Orange 16). Orange’s ‘hermeneutics of trust’ demands that we as individuals ‘fall’ from our panoptic tower and give up its objective view in exchange for ‘participation in a common world’ with the other (33). Orange applies Levinas’ ethics where in facing the other, the ‘suffering stranger,’ and in taking responsibility we *become* ourselves and are ‘called into being by the other’s naked and vulnerable face’ (46-50). This call into being, born of intersubjective understanding and responsibility, is very different from Althusser’s ‘hey, you there!’ that separates and categorises individuals. It is an opening up of the subject through mutual participation rather than the reduction of the subject into a ‘you,’ different and separated from me.

If the state acts by alienating life through its incessant categorization and individualization, Scott links anarchism, or at least an ‘anarchist squint,’ seeking the possibility of individual co-operation beyond the state, as *praxis* (*Two Cheers* xii, xxi-xxii). Scott’s *praxis*, much like hermeneutics, is about openness and play, and creating spaces of mutual co-operation outside of the state and the individualization it creates. Tellingly Scott opens his chapter on ‘The Production of Human beings’ with the story of a playground in Copenhagen. This playground, rather than being a traditional pre-established structure which would dictate the terms and means of play, would instead be a ‘raw building site’ complete with different materials and tools with never-ending possibilities (Scott, *Two Cheers* 57). Such a playground, a metaphor for anarchy predicated on *praxis*, the kind resembling Luxemburg’s Great Republic and Orange’s open, mutual dialogue, is rebuilt everyday and thus never looks the same (Scott, *Two Cheers* 58). The politics of *praxis* I am briefly advocating involves constant, spontaneous engagement with others and our environment, where the structures and relations we create rather than being reified and alienating instead are rebuilt each and every day through participation and experiential play.

Conclusion

The state through its productive acts of categorisation, interpellation, and individualisation alienates individuals from others, their environment, and their selves. This alienation can be characterised by a disjuncture between the political being and the human being, which grants differentiated protection to bodies inside and outside of politics. Liberal cosmopolitanism becomes a thin discourse, an aesthetic, where rights are instead always predicated on politics in abstract. Rather than engaging with the other and in turn constituting and recognising the self in that relation of humanness, that is experiencing a politics of intersubjective *praxis*, individuals experience a politics of alienation – from their human self and the human other. A politics of *praxis* instead asks the individual to ‘fall’ from their alienating and isolating separation in the panoptic tower and with feet firmly placed on the ground, that is in the everyday, to meet the other in a common world of play.

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