

## A Foucauldian Perspective on Covid-19 Response

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### ABSTRACT

Coronavirus Disease 2019, originated in Wuhan city of China, has been spreading across the world from December 2019 to till now with 55 million confirmed cases in 191 countries and nearly 1.3 million people deaths. As there is no vaccine available, the government and other institutions are taking measures to protect the people from this highly infectious disease. As the purpose of this paper is to define method and relate the more suitable method with Covid-2019 pandemic, in the introductory part, it has defined method and types of methods. It has also provided an overview of Post Structuralism, as a relevant method in explaining Covid-19 responses. Then, in a deeper way, this paper has discussed Foucault's concept of power: biopower, sovereign power and disciplinary power and examines its relevance with Covid-19 measures. It has also focused on the term 'New Normal'- the normalization of abnormal during Covid-19. Finally, the paper concluded with acknowledging the critiques of Foucault theories and limitations of the paper in explaining some of the aspects of ongoing pandemic.

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### 1. Introduction

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19), was first detected in Wuhan City of Hubei Province, China. After its outbreak in December 2019, it spreads throughout the world and within the first months of 2020, the World Health Organization declared it as a global pandemic. Till now Coronavirus is spreading across the globe with 55 million confirmed cases in 191 countries and nearly 1.3 million people deaths. As there is no vaccine available, WHO is suggesting everyone for wearing a mask, proper sanitization of hands, mouth and disinfection to keep people safe from this contagious disease. Governments are taking measures to reduce the rate of infected people and deaths by imposing restrictions on movement, closing school, colleges, imposing lockdown, mandatory quarantine, curfew, movement ban and other responses. Not only the government but also hospitals, social service providing institutions, and the media are encouraging people to 'stay home and stay safe'. As the purpose of this paper is to define method and find out the most suitable method in explaining the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, this paper will examine the responses and measures taken to reduce the spread of Coronavirus by government and other institutions, from Post Structuralist method, more specifically, Foucauldian concept of power: biopower, biopolitics, sovereign power and disciplinary power. This paper will also address the term 'New Normal' and will examine it from a Foucauldian lens of normalization.

### 2. Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative research method. Secondary data sources like books, research papers, newspaper articles are used for collecting data. Secondary data analysis is the main technique as well as method of gathering and analyzing data in this paper.

### 3. Method and Types of Methods

From different disciplinary perspectives method can be defined in several ways. While science sees method as “a process that scientists use to gather knowledge about the world around them and search for the objective truth” (Biology Dictionary), the method in social science refers to a process, techniques or a system of collecting and analyzing data.

From a philosophical dimension of method, it can be defined as a ‘the way of seeing the world’. As it provides a particular perspective about how the world looks like, it provides a basis which helps the individual to demystify appearance and reality. There are different types of methods such as Positivism, Post Positivism, Structuralism, Post Structuralism, Dialectics: Hegelian Dialectics, Marxist Dialectics, Indian and Chinese Dialectics. Based on their method, the interpretation is also different from each other. For example, while Positivism will prioritize the understanding of the world based on objective and value free analysis, Post Structuralism will argue, no knowledge is free from values, it has an intimate relationship with power.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the Covid-19 Pandemic from a methodological perspective. All the methods i.e. Positivism, Structuralism, Hegelian, Chinese dialectics are more or less relevant in explaining the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic from different aspects. As the focus of this paper is to scrutinize the measures taken by the authorities to contain Covid-19 transmission, the author finds Post Structuralism more suitable in explaining the responses.

### 4. Post Structuralism

Post Structuralism emerged as a response to the Structuralism in France, in the late 1960s. As opposed to Descartes idea of “I think therefore I am” (Descartes, 1637), structuralists argued that, people's reasoning isn't free from interventions, rather reason itself is constructed by the structure. By analyzing linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure writes that in linguistics, there are two elements in a sign: the signifier and signified (Saussure, 1959). If we say cat (signifier), the idea of a 4-legged cat (signified) will come into one's mind. There is no inherent relation between the signifier and signified, rather the relation is socially constructed. Thus, according to Saussure “language is fundamentally arbitrary and rather than allowing us to express our experience of the world in the same kind of objective manner instead shapes how we come to know the world.” (Carey, 2013)

Post structuralists i.e. Julia Kristeva, Ronald Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan agreed with the linguistic idea of Ferdinand De Saussure, deconstruction theories of Jacques Derrida and anthropology of Claude Levi- Strauss. As the paper is regarding Foucauldian perspective, it will discuss the Foucault's view of structuralism where he argues, the relation between signifier and signified is based on the power relation.

In the book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault gives detail ideas of this ‘power’. According to him, human knowledge has a close relationship with power (Foucault, 1995). It challenges the positivist idea that scientific knowledge is free from moral values and operates outside the value laden relation of social, political and economic power relation. Post structuralists believe that all human knowledge is highly influenced by the era's power relation. By the term ‘power’ Foucault doesn't refer to the state power or political representative rather he indicates the ‘wisdom of an era’. According to Foucault, each era has a particular structure of thought which is called episteme (the way in which a society thinks at the given time). The episteme allows new discoveries, at the same time, it limits some of the advancement of the scientific, economic and linguistic thoughts. That structure of thought doesn't allow the individual to know themselves and construct their own identities independently rather try to coerce them into appealing to some kind of normality.

Through ‘Archaeology’ and ‘Genealogy’ method, he shows how the structure of thought changes overtime with the changes of power. Foucault states that the power isn't centralized rather it is diffused within the society through school, college, hospital and in other forms. Power (the wisdom of era) limits the ability of the individual to gain knowledge about themselves, at the same time through the exercise of disciplinary power, school, college, universities and social institutions encourages people to internalize the structure of thinking of that particular era and limits their ability to construct their own identities. (Foucault, 1969)

This paper will examine the measures in response to Coronavirus pandemic from the Foucauldian concepts of Biopower, Sovereignty and Disciplinary power (will be discussed below). It will also discuss the term ‘New Normal’ from the perspective of biopolitical normalization and disciplinary power which was introduced in Foucault books: *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

## 5. Covid-19 Responses Through the Lens of Foucault:

From the Foucauldian perspective, the responses taken by the authority to reduce the Covid-19 transmission can be examined by the concepts of biopower, sovereign power and disciplinary power. This section has explained these three forms of power and their relevance with the ongoing Corona pandemic.

### 5.1 Biopower

The concept of Biopower was introduced by Foucault in his lectures at Collège de France, 1976. It is also addressed in the last chapter of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality (1976)*, named "*Right of Death and Power over Life*". Foucault refers to biopower as the "explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (Foucault, 1990, p. 140). Biopower, The power over life, was first developed before the 17th century. It can be compared with the sovereign power which was dominated in the pre-modern societies, where the monarch had the right of life and death over his subjects.

Along with biopower, Foucault also used the term 'biopolitics' in 1976, to characterize the political aim and strategies in Europe in the mid of 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to him, "that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques" (Foucault, 1990, pp. 141-142).

#### 5.1.1 Biopower, Biopolitics and Surveillance during Covid- 19

Biopower can be exercised through two forms. One, which Foucault termed as the "Anatomo- politics of the human body" in which refers to the exercise of control over individuals' body. It aims to produce docile bodies. This form of power was exercised in Plague pandemic management model in 17<sup>th</sup> century as well as can be seen in measures in response to Covid-19 pandemic where there is restriction upon the movement of bodies. The circulation of the bodies was controlled by strict rules and regulations, if they violate those rules, they would get penalty, in form of imprisonment or fine. The second form named "the biopolitics of population". This system of control does not aim at individual bodies rather the management of the whole population. Foucault concept of biopolitics is relevant in analyzing the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of managing the population through regulations. At least 30 governments around the world have taken surveillance measure to ensure social distancing during corona pandemic (Gershgor, 2020). The common form of surveillance is tracking mobile phone location data which helps to know if the infected people are maintaining quarantine. For combating Covid-19, China have used disinfectant drones and drones which flying the sky and suggesting people to wear mask and by scanning QR code giving health information to government's website. The police drones are also used in Shenzhen in Guangdong province to keep away the enforcement officials from public. (Novak, 2020) Taiwan also tracked the smartphone of 55,000 people under home quarantine. (Hui, 2020) In United States, Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) set up a Covid-19 'surveillance and data collection system' where it allocates 500 million dollars for health data surveillance. (Holmes, 2020) This disciplinary control, as a way of managing the pandemic, according to Foucault, is like "an attempt to maximize the health, life, longevity, and strength of individuals" (Hannah, Hutta and Schemann, 2020). He also argues the maintenance of healthy population aims at generating wealth and productivity which will result in the stabilization of political rule.

### 5.2 Sovereign Power and Corona Pandemic

The idea of Sovereign power of the administrative authority is also relevant in managing Covid-19 pandemic. As states' purpose is to keep as many as people saved from the pandemic, it uses its sovereign power such as imposing lockdown, restricted the movements of people, imposing curfew to certain areas to contain certain people quarantined, forbidding some activities of people. State also exercised its military power, police, and national guard for the maintenance of restrictions. This sovereign power is basically used, from a biopolitical perspective, to save as many as live from pandemic.

During the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic, Bangladeshi government imposed night time curfew to contain the spread of coronavirus transmission. Europe suffers most from this pandemic, the death rate of the people was also high in European countries.

Italy, Greece, Belgium, France, Spain have taken restrictive measures through night time curfew, nightly ban on people's movement, closure of schools, bars, restaurants and cafes (Davenport, 2020). Like other countries, Bangladesh deployed its local police to ensure the maintenance of social distancing during the lockdown period.

### 5.3 Covid-19 Management and Disciplinary Power

In the book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975)*, Foucault portrayed an analysis of administrative measures to a contagious disease named "The Plague Management Model" which is relevant in analyzing the management of Coronavirus pandemic.

Along with this model, Foucault addresses the new type of power which is called disciplinary power. According to him, "If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects." (Foucault, 1995, p. 198). He defines disciplinary power as non-violent practices which regulate human bodies and their behaviors.

Just like Corona pandemic management, during Plague epidemic management in the beginning of the 18th century, the binary division of infected versus healthy wasn't possible. The disease was contagious and anyone could be infected by plague and spread the virus throughout the region. Thus, not only the victim of plague but also the whole population was under the disciplinary mechanism. Through 'quarantine' there was strict control over the movement of the people and everyone was under surveillance and control. The aim of this disciplinary mechanism was to prevent the spread of the infectious disease by imposing a strict control on the movement of the bodies. This Quarantine concept is also applied in the coronavirus situation. Most of the countries such as Bangladesh, The United States, Germany, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Iran, Israel have taken measures from lockdown, quarantine to the closure of schools (Kaplan, 2020). According to Foucault, this quarantine mechanism is a reflection of the disciplinary power.

### **5.3.1 The concept of 'Panopticon' and 'No Mask No Entry'**

The emergence of disciplinary power in the 17th century resulted in the strengthening of the surveillance system. During the Plague epidemic, the people required to stay inside their home and their daily updates were collected by the police. People had to inform their conditions of health through their windows. Police used to check all the households and transfer the information to the higher authorities. Thus, all the people were under continuous surveillance.

Foucault relates this disciplinary mechanism with the philosopher Jeremy Bentham's design of the ideal prison named 'the Panopticon'. In the panopticon, there is a single tower from where the prison officer can watch all the cells and the behavior of the prisoners. As, the prisoners aren't aware of the time when they are being observed, therefore, they need to be careful all the time. As a consequence, the prison officer doesn't control them rather they are being controlled by themselves.

According to Foucault, the idea of panopticon is no longer confined within the prison. It can be seen in the institutions of the society: schools, colleges, Universities, hospitals. Through these routine activities, just like prisoners, people by themselves try to fit in the society by internalizing the way of thinking suggested through schools, colleges and other institutions. Through the everyday exercise of disciplinary power, people accept the structure of thought and take it as normal and if someone is thinking outside of the structure considered as abnormal.

This scenario can be seen in the Covid-19 situation, where schools, colleges, offices, hospitals all are normalizing the wearing of masks and individuals who aren't wearing it are considered abnormal and dangerous to the society. In countries like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and others, people aren't interested in wearing masks and taking precautions, thus these institutions are imposing "No mask No entry" decision to make the people wear masks.

In Vietnam, the deputy chairman of Hanoi suggests that the people should wear masks in public places. ("No mask No entry in public places", 2020) In Bangladesh, no one will be allowed to government offices without wearing masks. They introduced "No mask No Service" to tackle the second wave of coronavirus. ("No mask, No Service", 2020). The administration also imposed the rules of No mask no entry in Kuakata beach.

### **6. The New Normal: Normalizing the Abnormal**

According to Foucault, "the process of modernization is the process of normalization." (Foucault, 1975). Normalization can be held in two forms: 1. Normalization of bodies to a system of production. 2. The biopolitical normalization which refers to the normalization of population. This biopolitical normalization is more relevant in explaining Covid-19 pandemic.

After the breakout of Coronavirus, the term 'new normal' become a buzzword which refers that as Covid-19 changes the usual lifestyle of people, people need to adopt the new lifestyle to keep themselves safe from Coronavirus and cope up with the world. The new normal includes wearing a mask, using sanitizer, maintaining social distancing, online education, online business, work from home and so on. As the pandemic is ongoing, this normalization process is going on.

### **7. Critiques of Foucauldian Ideas and Limitations of this Paper**

Philosopher Charles Taylor, in his article "*Taylor and Foucault on Power and Freedom: A reply*", has questioned the usefulness of Foucault's idea of power. According to him, "If power, knowledge and the subjects a result of a particular political or social regime, then there can be no such thing as a truth independence of its regime unless it could be that of another so that

liberation in the name of truth could only be the substitution of another system of power for this one.” (Patron, 1989, pp. 260-274).

Nancy Frasers, in *“Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical insights and Normative Confusions”* criticized the genealogical model of Foucault as “normatively confused”. Regarding the idea of power, Nancy Fraser argues, “Foucault has no basis for distinguishing for example forms of power that involves domination and those that do not he appears to endorse a one-sided wholesale rejection of modernity as such, Clearly that Foucault needs and needs desperately a normative criterion for distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable forms of power” (Fraser,1981). But for Foucault, here lies an answer, according to him, “There are no universal criteria for distinguishing what is acceptable and what is unacceptable form of power. What is acceptable to one group, may not be acceptable for other groups, what is utilitarian for one group, may not work for individuals because the social and political use of power is the product of human desires and goals that are continuously shifting and changing; thus, no normative criteria can be established.” In terms of rationality, to Foucault, “Rationality is historically contingent.” (Founier, 2014).

The paper has analyzed the Covid-19 responses through the lens of Foucault and discussed the relevance of his idea of biopower, sovereign power, disciplinary power to the ongoing pandemic situation. One may argue that people don't strictly maintain the disciplinary rules, the sovereign power isn't exercising strictly. People aren't staying home anymore, many of them are visiting public places without mask, the idea of No mask No Entry or No mask No Service isn't running effectively, all these are correct in some extend, but as the purpose of the paper was to analyze the Covid-19 responses taken by the authorities, Foucauldian concepts are still relevant in explaining this response even if they aren't strictly obeyed by the people.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has explained Foucault's concept of power: biopower, sovereign power and disciplinary power and examines its relevance with Covid-19 measures. Biopower can be exercised through two forms. One, the exercise of control over individuals' bodies, second, “the biopolitics of population” which aims not at individual bodies rather the management of the whole population. Foucault concept of biopolitics is relevant in analyzing the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of managing the population through surveillance, phone tracking, using drones and investment of government in surveillance and data collection systems. This sovereign power of states i.e. curfew, restrictions on movements, deployment of police, are used, from a biopolitical perspective, to save as many as live from pandemic. In the disciplinary power, ‘The Plague Management Model’ which includes movement restriction, quarantine which is also relevant is analyzing the management of Coronavirus pandemic. The idea of Panopticon, more specifically the idea of “We are watching you' can be seen in the Covid-19 situation, where school, colleges, offices, hospitals all are normalizing the wearing of mask and individual who aren't wearing it consider as abnormal and dangerous for the society. Even though Foucauldian idea of power has some criticism, his concept of power is still relevant to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

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