

Black Death and White Civil Society: Foucault, Wilderson, and the Necessity of Necropolitics

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Abstract: Frank B. Wilderson, III opens his seminal article, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Wither the Slave in Civil Society,” with a striking and bold quotation from Eugene Genovese: “The Black experience in this country has been a phenomenon without analog.”¹ For Wilderson, such a poignant statement is affirmed by the thesis that for white civil society to be coherent, black death must necessarily follow suit, as the locus of genocidal rationality lies in the ability to deny others their humanness. To make sense of this thesis, the following paper puts Wilderson’s radical Afro-Pessimism in conversation with Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe in an attempt to tease out the ways in which black bodies are systemically excluded from, and exterminated in, white civil society. Specifically, I begin by explicating Foucault’s ‘positive’ vision of biopolitics as a life-securing force while linking it to Mbembe’s ‘negative’ vision of biopolitics as necropolitics – that is, a life-denying force – and note that the underside of the former is the latter. Further, I draw upon Wilderson’s analysis of ontological blackness to try to examine how black bodies are always-already positioned as the Other whose very existence, and by extension demands, are an existential threat to the system as such. Following the aforementioned setup, I conclude that white civil society *can only* function by differentially applying political régimes – biopolitics and necropolitics to white and black bodies respectively – in order to fulfill the ultimate goal of civil society as such: the security of (some) populations.

[Foucault, biopolitics, necropolitics, anti-blackness, racism]

Introduction

In Part Five of *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, Michel Foucault lays out what can be considered a ‘positive’ manifestation of a new form of power. In contrast to the *Ancien Régime* where sovereign power was exemplified by “the right to decide life and death,” Foucault notes that sovereignty as exemplified in modern, disciplinary societies is inversely related to archaic modes of control inasmuch as “the right of the sovereign is now manifested [...] as the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop life.”² For Foucault, this shift in the way sovereign power is exacted – a shift from “the right to *take* life or *let* live” to the ability to “*foster* life or *disallow* it” – is the foundation of “biopolitics”; a politics of life.³

¹ Cited in Frank B. Wilderson III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 9, No. 2 (2003): 225-240, 225.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1350463032000101579>

² Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998) 135-136.

³ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 138.

In the following paper, I want to extend Foucault's notion of biopolitics and note that the sovereign ability to "guarantee an individual's continued existence" is a 'positive' aspect of biopolitics that can only be experienced by *specific sub-sets* of populations.⁴ While Foucault notes that there is a dark-side to biopolitics by saying that "massacres have become vital" to ensure "the existence of everyone," there is a noticeable absence with regards to the target of these sovereign massacres.⁵ It is my contention that the 'positive' (life ensuring) and 'negative' (life exterminating) aspects of biopolitics are unequally applied to different populations. Following the work of Achille Mbembe and Frank B. Wilderson, III, I intend to argue that the necessary conditions for a 'positive' biopolitical project within civil society necessitates the 'negative' application of biopolitics – what Mbembe calls "necropolitics"; a politics of death.⁶

While there are a myriad of ways in which the State differentially applies power, in this paper I will specifically follow Wilderson's lead in "Gramsci's Black Marx: Wither the Slave in Civil Society?" and argue that the 'positive' elements of biopolitics can only be enjoyed by white bodies, while the massacres Foucault speaks of are not waged against 'foreign' enemies, but rather against black bodies within, but necessarily *excluded from*, civil society.⁷

From Sovereign to Disciplinary Power

[T]he power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual's continued existence.
-Foucault⁸

In reading Foucault, we can draw a distinction between pre-modern and modern forms of sovereignty using the exercise of power as an index. Strictly speaking, pre-modern forms of sovereignty are solely negative in their relation to life insofar as the sovereign was afforded the unconditional right to the decide who lived and who died. Such a negative mode of life-control operated as "a means of deduction" wherein the sovereign could "seize hold of life" for their own benefit.⁹ As absolute sovereignty became increasingly scrutinized, such power ultimately underwent a radical inversion insofar as power began to operate such that it was no longer "a right of seizure," but instead a right of preservation. Indeed, sovereign power was no longer typified by the right to take life, but instead by the right to organize, control, and consequently secure life.

⁴ Ibid., 137.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, No. 1 (Winter 2003): 11-40.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>

⁷ Frank B. Wilderson, III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 9, No. 2 (2003): 225-240.

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⁸ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 137.

⁹ Ibid., 136.

Within this new régime of control, two poles developed that determined how bodies were treated. First, the anatomic-political pole, a pole that “centered on the body as a machine,” was created. Under the ‘human-machine’ view, the body was something to be exploited and optimized for productive processes. Specifically, the view of the ‘human as a machine’ necessitated a system of regulatory controls that attempted to operate on the body so as to prepare it for later integration into systems of production. Thus, the anatomic-political pole involved the precise tuning of the ‘human-machine.’ Such operations, however, required a régime of knowledge about the body, and thus could not operate alone.¹⁰

Building the necessary régimes of knowledge about the body required another type of power, the power to *know*. As Foucault notes, a “*bio-politics of the population*” operated in tandem with anatomic-politics insofar as biopolitics involved surveillance of the body and its habits (be they dietary, sexual, etc.) thereby creating knowledge about individual and population behaviors, while the coupling of the two allowed for positive intervention into the workings of individuals and populations to produce desired results.¹¹ In a word, biopolitics as knowledge gave the ‘masters of humanity’ the knowledge to tinker with a body’s abilities.

Indeed, Foucault isolates this “great bipolar technology” as not only characteristic of the modern age, but of indexing a profound shift in how the body was viewed. Where “[t]he old power of death that symbolized sovereign power” was immanent up until the Enlightenment, technomanagerialism created the conditions wherein that view was “supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life.”¹² With the goal of sovereignty no longer residing in the desire to *take* life, but rather its ability to *foster* it, sovereign power could thus solidify itself by promising freedom from natural death by regulation of the functions of both the individual and the social body. Specifically, to protect the population from threats, the State began not only to develop “different fields of knowledge” concerning the life of the body politic, but politicized “biological existence” itself. Indeed, in the name of public health and population security, the State seized the means of existence such that sovereign “[p]ower would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself.”¹³ Thus, in order to secure the existence of populations, the State had to be able to mobilize those populations *in their own biological defense* against an unknown Other.

Security, however, is never politically neutral as, in order for it to exist, there must also exist something against which one is securing. For Foucault, power that is operating on the level of populations requires a threat similar in kind to create security; a population-based threat. Thus, for there to be security over life as such, there must be an equal threat to life as such; a biological Other that would, either intentionally or not, contaminate the purity of existent society.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 139.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; See Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 135-194.

¹² Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 139-140.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 142-143.

The Slave in White Civil Society

*Violence against black people is
ontological and gratuitous.
-Wilderson¹⁴*

As the quotation in the epigraph to the previous section shows, Foucault was well aware of the dark-side of biopolitics. While certainly no fan of the positive – that is to say, regulatory – aspects of biopolitics outlined above, the ability to ensure life for some was better than the dark-side it necessitated: the ability to take life from others. The question left open by Foucault’s famous statement on the vitality of massacres is ‘against whom are these acts of violence directed?’¹⁵ While there can be no doubt that the Nazis were first on Foucault’s mind (indeed, he directly references them later in the section), his lectures at the Collège de France during the latter-half of the 1970’s indicate that the construction of race was coming to the fore.¹⁶ While excellent work has been done analyzing *how* race fits in with governmentality and biopolitics, it is my goal to extend the argument made by Frank B. Wilderson, III that Western “civil society gains its coherence [...] through the violence of black erasure.”¹⁷ In this section, I will briefly recapitulate Wilderson’s argument in “Gramsci’s Black Marx” and go on to argue that the positive vision of biopolitics outlined above requires the black death Wilderson sees as inherent in civil society.

The black body, for Wilderson, is in a fundamentally unique position in regard to social antagonisms and thus cannot be subsumed under more traditional theories of social conflict. For example, while “[M]arxism assumes a subaltern structured by capital” and capital alone, Wilderson views the real root of social antagonisms as being structured by “white supremacy.” Given that, any problematization that doesn’t privilege white supremacy will necessarily be deficient.¹⁸ Indeed, for Wilderson, the very nature of civil society – that is, “the ensemble of so-called private associations and ideological invitations to participate in a wide and varied play of consensus-making strategies” – is anti-black and founded upon white supremacy.¹⁹ The reason for this is twofold.

First, Wilderson looks back to the history of colonialism to try to make sense of white supremacy. Where intra-European engagement involved similarity, the invasion of Africa was a clash of civilizations with little to no mutual intelligibility. Indeed, for Wilderson, colonial expeditions were met with “an Anthropological scandal.” Where Europeans could recognize similarity in other Europeans, the engagement with the radical alterity of the African was a culture shock insofar as the colonialists came into contact with “a being without (recognisable)

¹⁴ Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 229.

¹⁵ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 137.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

¹⁷ Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 238-239. Also, see both Kim Su Rasmussen, “Foucault’s Genealogy of Racism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, No. 5 (2011): 34-51.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411410448> and Michel Foucault, *“Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador Books, 2003).

¹⁸ Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 225.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

customs, religion, medicine, dietary patterns, culinary habits, sexual mores, [etc.]” This confrontation placed Europeans in a specific position: they could try to make sense of the Other and thus subsume them into European models of knowledge production, or annihilate their Being through slavery.²⁰ For Wilderson, contingent factors of supremacy and fear led to the latter being chosen, and thus the Other was enslaved. While slaves were, strictly speaking, brought into civil society, the unknowability of the Other created the conditions for their exclusion *from* civil society as a whole. Given that, Wilderson notes that “[s]lavery is the great leveler of the black subject’s positionality” insofar as all bodies are seen as equally expendable and no positive biopolitical knowledge was formed. The black body is “*off the record.*”²¹

Second, Wilderson notes a sharp distinction between how various bodies operate under capitalism. While white bodies are placed in a relation “with variable capital” founded upon alienation and exploitation as per Marx’s original formulation, black bodies are approached with “direct relations of force” wherein the body is more than just a cog in the machine of capitalism; it is *a piece of capital itself*.²² Indeed, such an understanding of ‘racial capitalism’ posits that while white workers’ labor is “exploited and converted into capital,” the black slave is utilized as a piece of capital and sold. Thus, not only are black bodies alienated from their labor, but their very Being was a form of capital to be accumulated.²³

Although members of contemporary bourgeois society will, no doubt, say that slavery was ‘abolished’ in 1865 and thus Wilderson’s analysis is radically outdated, such a claim fails to recognize not only the legacy of slavery, but also racism as a structuring principle of civil society. Following the so-called ‘school-to-prison’ pipeline and radically disparate rates of incarceration between racialized bodies in connection with capitalism’s rebranding of slavery under the 13th Amendment, it becomes clear that while slavery was nominally ‘abolished,’ the societally structuring principle of the differential relation between white and black bodies to capitalism is a residual spectre.

Thus, the demands placed upon capitalism by the accumulated subject are fundamentally different than the demands made by the white worker. Whereas the white worker desires more equitable treatment by demanding that “productivity be fair and democratic,” the slave is positioned against society insofar as they demand “that production stop.” While ‘equitable,’ but structurally identical, relations of production would eliminate alienation, the black body would still be a form of capital to be accumulated. Even when made aware of their unique relation to capitalism, the white worker only goes so far by calling “into question the legitimacy of productive practices.” The slave, on the other hand, is incommensurate with civil society as they call “into question the legitimacy of productivity itself.” In other words, where the dictatorship of the proletariat is acceptable for the white worker insofar as it makes the capital-State ethical, the slave demands total destruction of society as such and is thus unassimilable within the

²⁰ Ibid., 234.

²¹ Ibid., 236.

²² Ibid., 229-230.

²³ Aria Dean, “Notes on Blacceleration,” *E-Flux* No. 87 (December 2017).

<https://www.e-flux.com/journal/87/169402/notes-on-blacceleration/> Also, see Iyko Day, “Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, No. 2 (Fall 2015): 102-121.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.2.0102>

framework of the revolution.²⁴ Given such a position, the slave is, *a priori*, socially alienated, their very existence a threat to civil society as a whole.²⁵

Given such an understanding, we can begin to see how the existence of the black body can be seen as an existential threat not only to civil society as such, but also to the white population. If, as per Foucault, populations become the focus of governmentality, then population-based antagonisms become the business of the State. Indeed, if we blend this Foucauldian insight with the Wildersonian claim that racial antagonisms underwrite social struggles, we can see how the two-combined produce the conditions where the hegemonic race acts on the level of populations to secure itself. Specifically, if we have two body politics, white and black, that are pitted against each other as per the above, the very “existence of a population” is now at stake. Given that, the differential application of biopolitics necessarily ensues insofar as the preservation of one population – the positive side of biopolitics – rests upon “the power to expose a whole population to death” – the negative side of biopolitics.²⁶ It is thus to an analysis of these differential applications that we must turn.

The Underside of Power

[R]acism is above all a technology aimed at permitting the exercise of biopower.
-Mbembe²⁷

Achille Mbembe, taking cue from Foucault and highlighting the unexplored side of power, asserts that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides [...] in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.”²⁸ It is here that Mbembe makes explicit what is implicit in Foucault and noted above: the security of a population requires an Other. On biopolitics generally, Mbembe notes that the task of determining who must live and who must die relies upon a “distribution of [the] human species into groups,” and with it “the establishment of a biological caesura.” Such a schism, the split between the groups that must die in order for others to live, is what Mbembe isolates as Foucauldian racism. Indeed, for Mbembe, “[i]n the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state.”²⁹ It thus becomes easy to see that the dark-side to biopolitics consists of a foregrounding of death. In other words, where life (*bios-*) is paramount in positive visions of Foucauldian biopolitics, death (*necro-*) is the flipside and is paramount in negative visions of biopolitics; they are “two sides of the same coin.”³⁰

²⁴ Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 227-228.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

²⁶ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 137.

²⁷ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁰ Rosi Braidotti, “Bio-Power and Necro-Politics: Reflections on an ethics of sustainability,” *Springerin 2* (2007): n.p. <https://www.springerin.at/en/2007/2/biomacht-und-nekro-politik/>

Thus, by applying the Mbembian understanding of necropolitics, we can attempt to expand upon the Wildersonian project by making the violence inflicted upon the black body, at least partially, comprehensible. Indeed, as we saw above, the structuring relation of capital to various bodies already creates a “biological caesura” before biopolitics are invoked.³¹ Where capitalism structures the relations of white bodies under a régime of variable capital with an emphasis on participation in forms of oppression, the relation to black bodies is one of *subjective* exclusion and *material* inclusion. Where both the materiality of the white body and the subjectivity of the white spirit are drawn into a self-reinforcing relation with exploitation, the black *subject* is completely excluded while the black *body* is not only integrated into capitalism’s functioning, but becomes capital itself.

Thus, always-already placed in the position of the Other, the slave exists outside civil society and any demands made upon such a society will be, at best, damaging, and at worst, existentially threatening. When the slave demands freedom, they do not demand better working conditions or a change in the way productive processes are run – “[w]ould cows experience freedom at the mere knowledge that they’re no longer being slaughtered in an economy of exchange predicated on exploitation?”³² Rather, when the slave demands freedom, they demand the total destruction of the entire social system. Wilderson: “[t]he moment you [white civil society] set up your shit we’re going to be right there to jack you up.”³³

Bourgeois members of civil society reading interviews with Wilderson would succumb to existential dread as they clutched their pearls insofar as Wilderson notes that “[w]hat Afro-pessimism says is ‘death to Humanity’,” and that the goal is “to destroy the world.”³⁴ This fundamental Other that, while being excessive, places irreconcilable demands on civil society is not only a vital part of the capitalist project but is also simultaneously an existential risk to society as a whole. While, for Marx and Engels, the proletarians are the “grave-diggers” of the bourgeoisie, the slave is the death knell of white civil society.³⁵

Thus, returning to Foucault, if we understand positive biopolitics as the preservation of populations, it is easy to see how any existential threats must be met with the full force of the State. Against the imperatives by the slave to cease production and fundamentally destroy civil society, the violence of the State must be mobilized “in the name of life necessity.”³⁶ In order to secure the hegemonic population, biopolitics must be differentially applied. Thus, positive applications of biopolitics can only, in the face of the slave’s call for destruction, be applied to the white body politic. Its underside, the necropolitical violence of the State must, in turn, be

³¹ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 17.

³² Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 233.

³³ Frank B. Wilderson, III, “‘We’re trying to destroy the world’ Anti-Blackness & Police Violence After Ferguson An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III,” Original Interview on *IMIXWHATILIKE*, published by *Ill Will Editions* October 2014, accessed 12/11/18, 5-24: 13. (<http://sfbay-anarchists.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/frank-b-wilderson-iii-were-trying-to-destroy-the-world-antiblackness-police-violence-after-ferguson.pdf>)

³⁴ Frank B. Wilderson, III, Samira Spatzek, and Paula von Gleich, “‘The Inside-Outside of Civil Society’: An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III,” *Black Studies Papers 2.1* (2016), 4-22: 21. (<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-00105247-16>); Wilderson, “‘We’re trying to destroy the world,’” 20.

³⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (New York: Pocket Books, 1964), 79.

³⁶ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 137.

mobilized against the black body politic. It is for this reason that Wilderson recapitulates that “[s]tate violence against the black body [...] is not contingent, it is structural and, above all, gratuitous.”³⁷ Furthermore, the unknowability of the black subject makes it such that, even if desirable, biopolitics could not be positively applied to black bodies (even in such a benign way as to facilitate agonistic democracy) insofar as the *initial conditions for their introduction into the system* were founded upon relations of force and ontological exclusion. Indeed, the positionality of the slave as the unrecognizable Other cannot be assimilated into the biopolitical régime of knowledge production since, from the first invasions of Africa, to the invisibility of migrants in contemporary Europe, to Trumpian concentration camps, the non-white body is “*off the record*.”³⁸

³⁷ Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 229.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.