

To Make Live and Let Die: Biopolitics of Racial Disparity
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Abstract

This paper reconstructs Foucault's theories of biopower and racism and argues for their relevance to social scientists and theorists whose work focuses on racial inequality. According to Foucault, the modern biopolitical state exercises the prerogative to 'make live' – to cultivate the health, wealth, and wellbeing of its populace – but also to 'let die' – to differentially expose certain groups to detrimental or disadvantageous conditions. Racism, as Foucault conceives it, is the discourse deployed by the biopolitical state to demarcate the break between those whom the state equips to flourish and those whom it deprives and neglects. Racism justifies the selective reach of the life-supportive apparatuses of biopower. I apply Foucault's theory of biopolitical racism to the American metropolitan context and show how it can accommodate and illuminate a vast body of work on structural racial inequality. Following Agamben's enjoinder to identify contemporary 'spaces of exception' in which racially devalued groups are subjected to 'thanatopolitics', I argue that America's segregated inner cities are the manifestation and the location of biopower's practice of denying life chances along racial lines. Within the ghetto, the practice of limiting blacks' prospects is facilitated by residential segregation and operates through structural forces. I argue that the structural denial of black life chances should be understood as a form of violence. Structural violence, an impersonal and normalized form of violence that is built into the institutions of the basic structure and identifiable in its racially patterned outcomes, is the primary mode of violence employed by the American biopolitical state against its own citizens (as opposed to direct forms of brutality).

Keywords

Foucault, Agamben, biopower, thanatopolitics, structural racism, structural violence