

The Spatiality of Covid-19 Pandemic: Revisiting Foucault

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Abstract

The statement “man, as if were, a prosthetic God” by Freud has been dominating the humanity since the dawn of the modern period which privileged man over the rest of the species. Nonetheless, with the Covid-19 global pandemic, the privilege that humans enjoyed over the species of earth was shattered which wreaked havoc not only in the lives of people but also the very cultural fabric of the society. Michel Foucault talked about the measures taken by the officials in the 17th Century to contain the plague and the role of various institutions in the society and this paper conceives the idea of society during the time of pandemic as envisioned by Foucault. This paper also tries to explore the impact of Covid-19 on the socio-cultural aspect of the society by undertaking the spatial theory to analyze the relationship between the spaces like hospitals, home, public spaces and how these spaces shape and define the subjects residing in those respective spaces. This paper also focuses on the spatial theory of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau along with the concept of heterotopia of Michel Foucault in the context of the pandemic. According to Certeau, it is the people who give meanings to the space but other theorists such as Lefebvre and Soja suggest that the space and the people are involved in the production of meanings. This paper analyses the dynamics of the subjects placed in different spaces such as the hospitals(patients and the health care officials), containment zone(quarantined), public space (“normal”), liminal space, and the institutions of power.

Keywords: *biopolitics, third space, liminality, heterotopia, spatiality.*

“We have often been told, however, that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism” –(Jameson)

In his iconoclastic essay *Panopticism*, Michel Foucault talks about the disciplinary institutions of power, the capillary function of power; and how individual bodies become the sites of the execution of power, how those bodies are transformed into docile and passive ones through disciplinary mechanisms. In this essay, concept of space plays an important role in molding the subjects. The notion of the space as a passive, unchanging container was decentered when Henri Lefebvre stated his definition of space as a “social product” (117). That is, with rise of theories like post-structuralism and Marxism of the 20th century, the passive attribute of space underwent unprecedented changes that invoked multi-disciplinary discourses which offered new perspectives to

the concept of space by establishing it is a product of socio-cultural relations. The role of space in producing and shaping a society or an individual and the role of people in producing a space were never observed until Edward Soja postulated his notion of spatiality and the spatial turn which was inspired from the spatial triads of Lefebvre. Even though the spatial theories of Lefebvre, Soja and Michel de Certeau overlap at various levels, this paper tries to examine the influence of space on people and how people in turn provide meanings to spaces. In order to emulate the spatiality of Covid-19 pandemic and the dynamics between the space and the subjects, this paper conveniently divides the pandemic stricken spaces into disciplinary institutional spaces, containment spaces, liminal spaces, heterotopia, and 'normal spaces'.

The essay *Panopticism* deals with the disciplinary notion of power through the instance of the panoptic prison of Jeremy Bentham but he starts the essay by describing the situation of a plague stricken town during the 17th century to demonstrate the origin of disciplinary power. In order to contain the spread of plague, the towns were closed down; the people were ordered to stay indoors with each syndic to monitor each quarter. According to Foucault:

First, a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of death, the killing of all stray animals; the division of the town into distinct quarters, each governed by an intendant. Each street is placed under the authority of a syndic, who keeps it under surveillance; if he leaves the street, he will be condemned to death. On the appointed day, everyone is ordered to stay indoors: it is forbidden to leave on pain of death. The syndic himself comes to lock the door of each house from the outside; he takes the key with him and hands it over to the intendant of the quarter; the intendant keeps it until the end of the quarantine... Only the intendants, syndics and guards will move about the streets and also, between the infected houses, from one corpse to another, the 'crows', who can be left to die: these are 'people of little substance who carry the sick, bury the dead, clean and do many vile and abject offices'. It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment. (195)

Unlike the sovereign power which is direct and transparent in controlling the individuals using physical power, Foucault posits the birth of disciplinary power where the subjects could be easily controlled with constant surveillance where the subjects control their selves even without physical exertion of power and a situation of plague is an apt setting for governing the bodies the individual where they become passive subjects of power, accepting the orders propagated by the governing bodies. According to Foucault, "the plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies—this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city" (4). So the question is what is the significance space in this scenario? In the essay, he states that the town was divided into quarters and each quarter was supervised by intendants who allotted syndic to monitor each street where the residents were locked inside their houses by them. The public spaces were supervised by guards and check posts were installed. People were not allowed to step outside except for syndics, guards and intendants. The basic necessities like food and water were delivered at their doorsteps without any contact. The identity of an individual was reduced to just numbers and names in documents. The keys to the households of individuals

The Spatiality of Covid-19 Pandemic: Revisiting Foucault

where they were locked up were handed to the officials. Hence the houses or the private properties of the individuals are transformed into a diminutive version of the institutional structure, prison. Here the exclusive private space becomes a space of surveillance where the residents adhere to the rules and regulations by themselves. That is:

The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. (197)

According to Foucault, hospitals, prisons, educational institutions etc. are the disciplinary power structures which play a significant role in shaping and molding the behavior of its subjects and thereby ensuring and maintaining the capillary function of power. The following sections of this paper deal with the spatiality of these structures with respect to the contemporary scenario of the pandemic by following a comparative analysis with Foucault's notion of biopolitics.

Before 20th century, spatiality was often defined in correspondence with the term place. According to Certeau, "A place (lieu) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place)", and "Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function" (117). A place is an objective arena where locations are like coordinates of a map but when interaction takes place between people and a place becomes a "practiced place" (130) which is a space, where people live. Hence, it is people and their social relations that produce a space. According to Lefebvre, space being a social product produced by people, it is contingent on when it is produced and hence every mode of production produces a space of its own (28). Lefebvre explains the social production of space through his triads: observed space, conceived space and lived space. The observed space is the natural space, the space which is constructed by various actors. This is the space that represents the space perceived by them like kings, lords, developers, architect etc. They have a perception of the physical space at a place. The conceived space is the conceptions of space by people. It is the discourses about a social space. Lived space represents the combination of the first two abstract spaces. It is the concrete space which is lived by people that includes both the perceived and conceived notions of space. Hence the physical space and the conceived space results in lived space where people conceive and produce spatiality (1-464). Since the abstract notions also include the ideas of the privileged class and other power structures, lived space also incorporates all social affairs into its arena. So the theories of Lefebvre, Soja and Certeau share a common ground on the factor that space is a social product and the role of people in producing meanings. Foucault talks about how the space shapes or molds an individual which is significant to trace the dynamics between the space and its subject in the midst of a pandemic.

To explain the relationship between the space and its subjects amidst Covid-19 pandemic, this paper tries to divide the spaces into institutional spaces, lockdown or quarantine space, public space, heterotopic space. In the panoptic prison of Bentham, where bodies were rendered into

passiveness by constant surveillance, where the behaviors of the prisoners were controlled without physical exertion of power but with the space they were locked, that is:

at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. (200)

In this space where gaze is unidirectional, prevented the subjects about the knowledge of when they are being watched by the officers and as a result they themselves become the bearers of power (195-228). In the contemporary scenario in general, where the nation being in a state of emergency, the lockdowns, the regulations in travelling, business and other activities have produced subjects that are equivalent to the prisoners of the panoptic prison or the quarantined subjects of 17th century plague stricken town. During the time of Foucault, the population was divided into normal ones and the abnormal ones, who were sent to disciplinary institutions to with a motive of economy of the individual. In the contemporary scenario, there are other beings apart from normal and abnormal ones/positive ones and negative ones, the liminal beings occupying the liminal space. These liminal beings are the quarantined subjects who stay at their homes locking up themselves and distancing themselves. Like the syndics who monitored the people, these subjects are also kept under tabs by the officials.

In the case of household space, two types of spatial dynamics are involved: house/home dichotomy and quarantine in isolation spatiality. As the difference between a space and a place has already been described, it is certain that “a space is practiced place” (130) and a place is “the instantaneous configuration of position, an objective and stable phenomenon” (117). The formation of space can be formulated by analyzing the relationship between the subjects that are present in a place. So house is just a place but the relationship between the subjects in that place and also their interaction with that place, transforms a house into a home, a space of love, warmth and safety. Hence the frantic atmosphere of the pandemic is replaced by a sense of safety in this space. The paradox of this spatiality is that the individuals who are quarantined in these spaces regulate themselves and this space of love and warmth simultaneously becomes a hybrid space. In the case of quarantine in isolation, the subject isolates the self by occupying a space that separates from the rest. Here the above stated paradoxical situation is negated by the obvious panoptic apparatus where the collective subjectivity superseded by individual subjectivity which is monitored by the authorities. Hence this space, quarantine in isolation, can be taken as a miniscule panoptic prison. Unlike the collective subjects that stand in contradiction with the singular representation of the subject, the subjects in isolation can be divided into two groups: the possessed and the exposed. The possessed group can be taken as the people who have tested positive for the virus that require substantial medical support which also incorporates a constant surveillance of their actions that has to be recorded to curb the spread of the virus. The exposed ones are the subjects that isolate themselves for a specific period of time after coming into contact with an affected person. In that specific time period of two weeks, the subjects are neither positive nor negative to be taken to the hospital or to

leave the quarantined space which thus affirms their status as liminal beings of the pandemic. Unlike the liminal being, *homo sacer*, of Agamben—who lives in the state of exception where there is no political life, where the liminality of the being meets a paradoxical impasse where their rights have not only been stripped away by the authority but also the subject can be persecuted on the basis of jurisdiction with an added incentive that offers others to kill the subject without facing a trial (Agamben 73)—the liminal subjects of the pandemic cannot be described and categorized as a *homo sacer* but can be taken as the *zoés* of modern era. The state of emergency, like the pandemic, has already been regarded as ideal for governance by Walter Benjamin where the conventional rules are suspended; the people of the state naturally become the subjects of power or *zoé* and thus, the subjects of the Covid-19 pandemic can be taken as the obvious modern day *zoés*. The concept of liminality represents otherness and fluidity, but by analyzing the parallels of liminality and the liminal being of Agamben divulges an impasse in concept of fluidity, that is, it invokes the reinstatement of the centralization of the liminal beings.

In the essay *Panopticism*, Foucault posits the states of a leper and the people affected by the plague, where the state of the leper bolstered exclusion while the plague favoured the disciplinary mechanism which aimed at the economy of human subjects by integrating the features of exclusion and disciplinary mechanism (196). Before the 17th Century plague and the birth of disciplinary mechanisms, the lepers were separated from the rest for ensuring a pure community and they remained as outcasts. Apart from the privileged *zoés* of the modern era, there is also another group that has been completely ostracized and forgotten during the pandemic. Like the lepers, before the 17th C plague, who were excluded from the community, there also existed a group that was vulnerable and destitute unlike the rest of the beings, the homeless beings. These subjects can be taken as nomads as they often moved in search for shelter and also for survival necessities, where they could rest for the night probably on an open space. The homeless people are not a homogeneous group that includes beggars and destitute. It can include anybody who works but lack a home as in the case of migrant laborers, physically and mentally challenged, old people who were abandoned by the families, minor children, the destitute, single women etc. The survival of this heterogeneous group during the pandemic which dictates social distancing, masking, isolating etc. is even more dreadful than their usual days of living. The spaces that they occupied before the pandemic were open spaces which include spaces under the bridges, waiting sheds, public benches, stairs of the shops and even the shelters. In this case, there is no building or even well-built roof over their heads that can be regarded neither as home nor as house to grant them a sense of being and safety. The subjects in the spectrum of homeless group are generally seen as deviant as they do not fit into the stereotypes of normal beings to which the extensions of undesirability and abnormality are further attached. Foucault talks about heterotopic spaces where subjects that are seen as deviant are placed in his first principle of heterotopia and by taking the homeless subjects into consideration; their shelters can be taken as a heterotopia which according to Foucault is:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the

sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (3-4)

Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias ends by stating the spatiality of boat which itself is a heterotopic space that floats in the infinite ocean without any emplacement and he also described that heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several others spaces that are incompatible which can be taken alongside the instance of spatiality of boat (9) to represent the homeless subjects. Like the boat that floats in the infinite sea, it can be taken as a space within a place which is significant for the subject's characteristics and the homeless people occupying open places with their tents can be taken as a parallel to heterotopia and a manifestation of a practiced space. But nonetheless, they fall into the category of deviant group and the spaces they occupy borderlines with the state of exclusion. With the outbreak of the pandemic these subjects were pushed off from the edges of marginalization that their existence was even forgotten.

With the outbreak of pandemic and the state of emergency, what was considered as normal functioning of the society came to a halt which demanded new modes of functioning of the society. Not only the private spaces but also the public spaces have underwent subsequent changes, and the pandemic stricken public space have assisted in the production of a nation-wide heterotopic space as Foucault stated in his sixth principle of heterotopia in the essay. In the sixth principle, he mentions the heterotopia of compensation where another space is created something that can be taken as ideal. That is:

the first wave of colonization in the seventeenth century, of the Puritan societies that the English had founded in America and that were absolutely perfect other places...also those extraordinary Jesuit colonies that were founded in South America: marvelous, absolutely regulated colonies in which human perfection was effectively achieved. The Jesuits of Paraguay established colonies in which existence was regulated at every turn...The daily life of individuals was regulated, not by the whistle, but by the bell. Everyone was awakened at the same time, everyone began work at the same time; meals were at noon and five o'clock, then came bedtime, and at midnight came what was called the marital wake-up, that is, at the chime of the churchbell, each person carried out her/his duty. (8-9)

This other place or heterotopia is not just a building but a nation and the parallels between the heterotopia of compensation and the contemporary pandemic stricken state are uncanny. Thus the society and the public domain can be taken as heterotopia of compensation run by the authorities where the people becomes the subjects of this vast heterotopia.

The power structures are another sect that occupy a significant position in the public domain and have been taking necessary steps to curb the spread of covid-19 virus by dictating rules and regulations that are imperative yet have strange resemblance to the steps taken by the officials during the 17th C plague stricken town as mentioned by Foucault in *Panopticism*. The steps taken by the officials during the 17th C plague and its spatiality was mentioned in the previous sections of this paper; and how the subjects of that space became docile due to the constant surveillance by the officials at every corner of the state. The Repressive State Apparatus of the contemporary society can be taken as an equivalent body to the syndics and the intendants of the 17th C plague stricken town. They can be taken as one of the operators of the panopticon which provided them the knowledge and power over the space that is under their supervision. In a way they can be taken as the one of the

agents in ensuring the production of the vast heterotopia as mentioned before and the subjects of this space corresponds to the prisoners of the panoptic prison or the residents of the plague stricken town. Even though medical institution can be taken as a heterotopia where the 'abnormal' bodies are beings treated, yet science has helped many subjects of the state to survive during the pandemic. But being a disciplinary institution of power that upholds the capillary notion of power, not all subjects of the nation received the service equally. The privileged ones received all assistance while the destitute struggled to breathe. The State is another operator of the panopticon, the indisputable administrator of the vast virus stricken heterotopia due to the knowledge and power generated in the state of emergency that gave them an unduly advantage to create any spaces where the protocols to curb the spread of the virus are suspended. What was even seen as the opposite of the pandemic situation, carnivalism, grew out in this situation that celebrated rituals to please the deities. Apart from the specified spaces and the subjects of these spaces, there is also another sect that flourished during the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virtual space, which strived to continue and maintain the normalcy via online platforms. This virtual space, nevertheless, has also created and maintained the binaries between the haves and the havenots, where underprivileged ones still remained at the periphery along with unemployment and poverty while the privileged ones cherished through online platforms and social media.

The history has shown the progress of humanity over the centuries where people battled all the hurdles that obstructed their path, humans have even faced many deadly plagues and diseases that could have obliterated the entire human race but nature and the environment have never been the enemies of humans, who are social beings. This paper has tried to draw the parallels between the 17th C plague stated by Foucault and the Covid-19 pandemic to formulate the inner workings of institutions of power, biopolitics, etc. by examining the spatiality and its subjects.

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