

ARTICLE

Biopolitics of disaster and social intervention in the city.

Biopolítica del desastre e intervención social en la ciudad.

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Abstract

Disasters occurring in urban settings are significant concerns for disciplines related to social intervention, especially given the increased frequency of events linked to climate change and the unpredictability of seismic activities. This context complicates local governance and strategies for intervention. Drawing from a literature review that includes authors such as Cavalleti, Foucault, Lawrence, and Grove, this article addresses three main themes: a) the framework of biopolitics in the city; b) the scope of biopolitics in the face of urban disasters; and c) the theoretical problematization of this issue from the perspective of social intervention. The discussion contrasts ideas of disciplinary control versus affirmative biopolitics in disaster intervention, critically reflecting on perspectives that emphasize the technical management of catastrophic events without considering

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the ethical-political components in pre and post-disaster social intervention processes. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of disaster biopolitics as a political strategy for social intervention in urban environments.

Resumen

Los desastres que ocurren en las ciudades constituyen un asunto relevante para las disciplinas relacionadas con la intervención social. Complejizan el afrontamiento de futuras contingencias una mayor recurrencia de eventos relacionados con el cambio climático, sumada a la imprevisibilidad de los eventos sísmicos. Este contexto tensiona la gobernanza local y los modos de intervenir frente a estas situaciones. A partir de la revisión bibliográfica, que incluye autores como Cavalleti, Foucault, Lawrence y Grove, entre otros, esta presentación responde a tres temas: a) ¿cuál es marco de la biopolítica en la ciudad?; b) ¿Cuál es el alcance de la biopolítica frente al desastre en contextos urbanos?; y c) ¿cómo se problematiza teóricamente este asunto desde la intervención social? En este último aspecto se cotejarán ideas de control disciplinario versus biopolíticas afirmativas frente a situaciones de intervención del desastre. Se reflexiona críticamente sobre aquellas perspectivas que enfatizan en la gestión técnica de “eventos” catastróficos sin considerar estos componentes ético-políticos en los procesos de intervención social pre y post desastre. Se concluye reflexionando qué implicancias tiene la biopolítica especializada en desastres como estrategia política para la intervención social en medios urbanos.

Palabras Claves:

Biopolítica del desastre; ciudades; control disciplinario; normalidad



Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a growing academic interest in disasters across disciplines related to intervention (Harms et al., 2022). Social work, in particular, has not been an exception, considering the significant humanitarian impact associated with acute manifestations of these processes. A quick literature review reveals various research themes, such as the analysis of methods for professional action, roles, and functions in disaster response (Maglajlic, 2019; Hay and Pascoe, 2021; Sim and He, 2022; Sim et al., 2023). The profession addresses issues like resilience and initial psychosocial care (Suazo, 2015; Fulton and Drolet, 2018; Torres et al., 2018), and the violation of rights and gender in catastrophes (Comerón, 2015; Vásquez et al., 2019), among others.

The increase in temperatures is influencing the acceleration of global climate change, explaining the significant rise in situations classified as disasters in recent decades. Alongside the recurrence of earthquakes, eruptions, and other geologically originated catastrophes, a scenario of significant contingencies for the near future is outlined, causing concern across the humanities, sciences, and technologies of our century. The social sciences are not immune to this concern, and one of these considerations extends towards intervention, both in crisis and humanitarian emergency situations and concerning the historical cycles of disasters in a particular territory.

This scenario requires consideration of what type of pre and post-disaster intervention is suitable for this increased social complexity. Therefore, it is necessary to debate the frames of reference for social intervention, theoretically and methodologically supporting how transformation, adjustment, and normalization are achieved in crisis situations related to disasters. This problematization frames the confrontation of future contingencies. Communities, specialist teams, and risk management policy agencies predict more extreme events related to climate change, combined with the unpredictability of seismic events. This context puts a strain on local governance and the ways of intervening in places where professions related to social intervention operate. In this regard, Dominelli (2015) believes that social work can optimize disaster interventions, as it visualizes the structural problems of territories, addresses differentiated experiences in disadvantaged collectives, and contributes better to sustainable development. Therefore, it becomes especially relevant to include in the discussion the socio-spatial dimensions of the problem, with an emphasis on urban spaces.



According to information provided by the World Bank (2022), in 2021, Latin America had an 81% urban population. In countries like Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Chile, the figure exceeds 85%. The high population concentration in Latin American cities has various effects, one of which is related to social and institutional vulnerabilities particularly evident in crisis situations. At the same time, these are countries highly exposed to various natural threats, posing a high risk factor for their cities. Chile's case is significant, as its major urban conglomerates have experienced significant catastrophes in recent decades, including the 1985 earthquake (Valparaíso and Santiago), the 2010 earthquake-tsunami (Concepción), and the major urban fires of 2014 and 2022 (Valparaíso and Viña del Mar).

This article reflects on the biopolitical foundations of social intervention in urban contexts. For this purpose, a systematic literature review was conducted, using the concept of biopolitics as a guide for inquiry. Various reference texts in book (print and digital) and indexed journal articles were accessed through databases such as Wos-Isi, Scopus, Sielo, Erih Plus, and Latindex. The criteria used for bibliographic selection correspond to thematic relevance and the exhaustiveness of the documentary search. This article aims to explore three topics: a) what is the framework of biopolitics in the city?; b) what is the scope of biopolitics in the face of disaster in urban contexts?; and c) how is this issue theoretically problematized from the perspective of social intervention?

The City from a Biopolitical Perspective

Examining the urban problem through biopolitics considers the representation of a localized form of political biology, suggesting various ethical-governmental implications. This stems from the notion that “the city is a conglomerate of individuals united by some kind of agreement to preserve their lives, and the primary task of those who govern is to guarantee that preservation” (Fonti, 2019, p.47). The promotion of the common good represents an obligation for governments, as they must not only seek to increase the prosperity levels of the population but also mitigate dangers and vicissitudes. Preventing insecurity in its broad sense is a task of city governance (Cavalleti, 2010). This purpose links biopolitical thinking with urban space, represented as a territorial inscription of power (Barrera, 2018). This should be affirmed in sustainable and accessible minimums for the population, even though urban life is expected to be continuously exposed to uncertainty.



Biopolitics refers to the field of forces that contest the control of life. Although it does not constitute its conceptual genesis (Prozorov, 2022), the importance of Foucault (2003) in its theoretical delimitation is generally recognized. In this sense, the issue of the temporal and historical location of biopolitics goes beyond the idea of its Foucauldian ignition, with some remnants found in the Enlightenment or the European colonial-imperialist moment (Rodas, 2017). Biopolitics deals with a relevant field of meanings for the analysis of political and cultural processes of the early 21st century. Therefore, urban phenomena have also been studied under this conceptual perspective (Oakes, 2019; Filipović, 2021). The genesis of biopolitical thought involves aspects related to urban settlement, observed in social and biological aspects such as births, deaths, mobility, and morbidity, among others.

Fuster and Moscoso-Flores (2016) state that biopolitics makes the population category visible in the territorial analysis of power within the framework of governmentality. In this regard, the concentration of the population in urban geographical areas is related to an increase in surveillance and control measures. Furthermore, this trend is observed in the establishment of the nation-state project in Chile and in the preliminary processes of modernizing its major cities.

One of the most interesting approaches to the biopolitical issue of the city is proposed by Andrea Cavalleti (2010). Influenced by Foucauldian thought, the author notes that power and space are intertwined. For this, Cavalleti refers to Carl Schmitt's proposed formula, emphasizing that there are no political ideas without space. Discourses of security favor governmental action for disciplinary control in the city. The historical threshold of urbanism between the 18th and 19th centuries involved the development of a general theory of the population, where nothing is left "abandoned or unguarded" (Cavalleti, 2010, p.81). Therefore, in shaping spatial order in the city, procedures for collecting statistics on inhabitants are unavoidable as an appropriate mechanism to rigorously and systematically understand the population collectively. This constitutes significant evidence of the biopolitical imprint on the population and territory (Urabayén and León, 2018). The importance of population registration and counting can explain how security is positioned at the ideational core of the modern city. Similarly, the footprint of population registration has ancient precedents in Latin America. For example, Araya (2012) refers to how the colonial Catholic Church maintained registry control of parishioners and parishes through the creation of the so-called Matrícula de Alday, which is an interesting case of close monitoring of population data in the territory.



The ideal of security seeks to subjugate human nature in a Hobbesian sense. In this postulate, it is the sovereign who ensures a social balance between the forces of self-preservation and the thirst for power. However, this perspective evolved towards a more modern phase when the notion of the common good was introduced. For this argumentative review, urban life urges the duty to protect the general interest of the population, requiring a series of policing policies in cities. It is worth noting that, in its original sense, the term “police” referred to the search for good government for cities, beyond the forms of institutionalism that deal with current order and repression. In this sense, Cavalleti (2010, p.122), citing a text by De La Mare from 1705, notes that the word “police” is used to “designate the public order of the entire city.” These overlays pose problems regarding the distribution of space in the city and the development of specific techniques to stabilize biological variables, beliefs, and different emerging practices (economic, political, religious). Cavalleti points out that a potential response to this problem is found in Foucault’s thinking (2021). In Foucault’s terms, three models of guardianship over space-territory are proposed, revealing rules of inclusion and exclusion concerning abnormality. The first, called the leper model, tends to expel disease (evil) beyond urban limits. The second, the plague model, instead produces the separation of those who carry the disease, their subjugation, and control through punishment. However, unlike the treatment of leprosy (and, Foucault notes, madness), the processing of the plague is triggered within urban limits. According to Sousa-Alves (2021), this distinction presents the conception of a social order based on training, docility, and transparency. An example of this perspective on exclusion is observed, for instance, in Neila’s (2022) work on control and exclusion in refugee camps in Greece. The third model is the smallpox model, which configures “a biopolitical strategy centered on the security and risk anticipation device” (Caponi, 2021, p.3). For this purpose, it is necessary to provide power with territorialized information about the characteristics of the population to determine prevention and security measures that prevent calamity. The Covid-19 pandemic can be interpreted under the smallpox model, for example, in the government’s goal of extending vaccination to the entire population. In these three territorial logics lies part of the political foundation on urban order regarding the security/normality dichotomy. The aforementioned models justify the degrees of tolerance towards biopolitical exceptionality in the history of the city.

Building on what Cavalleti (2010) points out, the normal urban order was based on a set of political strategies that emphasized security. In its contemporary profile, and to fulfill government purposes, statistical population control techniques (Cheney-Lippold, 2011) have been perfected in neighborhoods and sectors of the city. This includes the specia-



lized use of algorithms for online consumption recording and data mining to anticipate behaviors of specific groups. As noted by Do Amaral et al. (2019), modes of urban control have evolved thanks to surveillance of public spaces through satellite imagery technologies and the use of drones. This enables the asymmetric militarization of daily life in populated neighborhoods and sectors. Therefore, it is important to explore how these forms of disciplinary control are established in cities, as they are rapidly evolving (Iveson and Maalsen, 2019), gradually being normalized by the population and legitimized by the State. However, a greater intrusion of control over excluded areas of the city arouses irritation in its population. An interesting case was studied by Luneke (2021), concerning the experience in the La Legua neighborhood in the San Joaquín commune (Metropolitan Region, Santiago de Chile). The research shows how the intervention has prioritized a series of improvements to public spaces with simultaneous police deployment in the neighborhood.

The governmental connotation in these surveillance tasks goes beyond the limits of public spaces. This occurs due to the massive use of macro-information registration and management devices. The territorial concentration of human groups in the city facilitates the capture of their data, statistical manipulation of the data, and categorization of the resulting information for intervention purposes. The valuation of data transparency is justified in reducing the uncertainty of governance. According to Paasche and Klausser (2015), personal privacy represents a security inconsistency. While national and international legislations guarantee it, the valuation of security justifies its transgression by public security agencies.

Biopolitics of Disaster

In the city, the application of biopolitical techniques involving registration, control, and restrictions fluctuates within tolerable margins. Among other aspects, the medicalization of life (Aurenque and De La Ravanal, 2018) and the expansion of telesurveillance controls in cities (López, 2020) have contributed to these applications being inexorably assimilated into the population's everyday experience. However, this plasticity can fracture during significant disruptions to daily life. Disasters are part of these exceptional scenarios in cities.

A disaster is an “interruption in the functioning of a community or society” (UNDRR 2015, p.11) that cannot be countered or resolved by the affected individuals and institutions using their own resources or capabilities. The typologies and effects of disasters

are heterogeneous, depending on geographical aspects, the economic income level of the affected territory, and the available institutional support. Nevertheless, disasters: a) should not be conceived as isolated events but rather understood as processes or cycles; b) their nature is not natural but essentially social and historical; and c) their occurrence involves incremental and stressful effects, both for the affected individuals and the agencies responsible for managing these emergencies. The acute milestones of disasters have magnitudes to worsen previous social, cultural, and economic conditions (Garza, 2018), potentially initiating periods of long-lasting historical disruptions. This occurred in the past with the Lisbon earthquakes of 1755, the great Chinese drought of 1876–1879, the urban fire in Chicago in 1871, or the more recent effects of the 2004 Indonesia tsunami, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Chile, on the other hand, has a vast record of catastrophes that have marked its history and institutional political development (Onetto, 2014; Henríquez et al., 2016; Saavedra, 2021).

In line with Rogers (2018), biopolitics provides a good starting point for critically analyzing controversial issues such as what kind of urban resilience is promoted in the face of extreme events. The biopolitics of disasters is a specificity within the conceptual debate on governmental rationality. Based on Grove (2013, p.571), it can be stated that this responds to a normative form of biopower that seeks to “visualize, control, and modify collective life.” The biopolitics of disasters emerges as a critical perspective on the ideas that underpin risk in society. According to Lawrence (2018), theoretical approaches to risk enhance their technical and analytical capabilities without sufficient political content density. This limits the explanation of why the affected groups are the ones mainly burdened with the reconstruction of homes and workplaces. The self-assurance of living risks links this form of biopolitics with neoliberalism, although it is necessary to note that this sociopolitical regime does not exhaust its explanatory field in biopower.

Based on what Grove (2012) proposes, two characteristics applicable to this biopolitical specificity emerge. Firstly, in disaster situations, governmentality seeks to “abstract, leverage, and parasitically appropriate power” (p.150). The appropriation of the event acts on other usual biopolitical mechanisms, such as the exercise of property rights. The author suggests that this occurs, for example, with the militarization of the disaster-affected territory, limiting the emerging possibilities of life but at the same time enhancing governmental capabilities to act on the ground. Secondly, there are risk parameterizations considered by catastrophic insurances. These risk calculations optimize the possibilities of increasing the power of the State in emergency management. Regarding the specific case of the Caribbean Catastrophic Risk Insurance Facility, Grove (2012) notes that this type of instrument empowers governmentality to prevent the



breakdown of post-disaster normative order. This allows participating States to “repair critical infrastructure more quickly, provide basic services, maintain order, and begin recovery efforts” (p.150). This relates to Félix Guattari’s proposals to explain a form of subjective economy oriented towards biopolitical regulation (Grove, 2017).

In the literature review, there are various assessments regarding the meaning and scope of the biopolitics of disasters. One line is closer to the affirmative biopolitics proposed by Esposito (2018), where life is the center of the discussion, as well as its production and care. Tudor (2021) notes that this biopolitical perspective promotes adaptive responses in groups of survivors, aiming for a better response to the complexities of coping with a particular disaster. Regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, Kingman (2020, p.48) states that disaster can constitute an opportunity “to think differently and to live differently,” highlighting the recovery of solidarity and care, among other possibilities.

Other approaches are more critical of the strategies derived from this biopolitical specificity. Marchezini (2015) proposes that, faced with a disaster, the components of this biopolitics are geographic information systems (GIS), statistics, risk maps, government agencies, military and paramilitary forces, among others. These do not necessarily articulate for the purpose of aiding in the catastrophe but rather are used to sustain political guardianship over life. Regarding the floods that affected Sao Luiz do Paraitinga in Brazil in 2010, Marchezini argues that both discourses and biopolitical practices led to unintended consequences, as community life depreciated, tending towards the abandonment of these populations in the long term. In line with this critical view, Céspedes and Campos (2021) studied the case of the major urban fire that affected Valparaíso in 2014 from this perspective. In this regard, they describe that:

“from a biopolitical and governmental perspective, the Plan aims to produce a new subject: one that, through the establishment of property boundaries, can be located in urban space; that, through the typification of construction zones, can be regulated in its potential for producing threats; that, through the establishment of construction typologies and materialities, can be predictable – and not threatening – in its constructive behaviors; that, through the regularization and formalization of services, acquires financial coordinates and becomes a potential credit subject” (p.404).

Therefore, it is important to establish caveats regarding the scope of the biopolitics of disasters, as under the slogan of saving lives “it seeks to legitimize the action of organizations, institutions, and industries associated with security” (Saavedra and Marchezini, 2019, p.144).

Biopolitical Strategy in Disaster Intervention

Disasters involve severe disruptions in the life of cities. This entails disturbances in the trajectories of urban consolidation, which are particularly intense in poorer countries. Professions such as social work play a significant role in urban and specific neighborhood contexts (Gómez-Hernández, 2022), which are symbolically and materially framed as urban areas of poverty and vulnerability. This establishes patterns of regularity used by institutions to anticipate possible margins of normality. For this purpose, technical tools are available, such as the Social Registry of Households (RSH, Ministry of Social Development and Family of Chile), designed to conduct a strict socio-economic qualification. It is worth noting that Law No. 20,379² of 2009 considered territory as a factor in characterizing the creation of this population information management tool.

The modern political imaginary assumes that a segment of the population might be in a permanent state of need. Since the early days of social work, the recognition of the social issue in specific territories explained its genesis as a profession in the late 19th century, related to a pauperized population both agent and victim of the industrial revolution. The social issue in Latin America has specificities related to historical nuances of modernity, as analyzed by Larraín (2005). The ethical-political debate on the social issue is foundational for the reconceptualization of social work (Viveros, 2020). The concept of a normal/normalized city is not only regulated in terms of space usage but also in cautiousness about movements, aggregations of individuals, and productive and reproductive activities in the city.

According to Saavedra (2023), social intervention assumes conditions of stability for its operation in normalcy. This implies that intervention is naturalized, subtle, and scalable. Naturalization means that the population accepts the legitimacy of institutional actions, even in the realm of privacy. Subtle intervention, in this context, means that its means are lightweight, possibly embedded in bureaucratic invisibility, without initially resorting to coercion on individuals or the population. The scalability of intervention is related to the aforementioned subtlety. When expected results are not evident, more energetic resources are available for social intervention to redirect, individually or collectively, towards the socially desirable within the sociopolitical regime.

However, in disasters, the normal mode of social intervention is overwhelmed. Human losses, post-traumatic stress, and material damage rupture the daily life of cities, overburdening local social services. There is an increased demand for material aid and healthcare services. Ideological definitions of public policy play a role in the depth of the

² Law 20,379, which establishes the Intersectoral System of Social Protection and institutionalizes the subsystem of comprehensive protection for children "Chile Crece Contigo".

disruption of normalcy. In neoliberal orders, cooperation is replaced by competition, a principle questioned in some recent post-disaster recovery cases (Berroeta et al., 2016).

Referring to Cavalleti (2010), in disasters, frames on city safety exceed their conceptual and practical boundaries. Spaces defined as safe become insecure. Symbolically, catastrophes also shift the configurative tectonics of urban ideational space. The biopolitical strategy in the city must restart itself by default. Emergency management revisits principles of discipline and social control, which may be considered inadequate for the current development stage of the country but are effective in preventing disorder and political order disruption. Measures like curfews, military deployment, and detailed surveys of the affected population are used in events like the 2010 earthquake and the severe fires in the Biobío region in 2019. In this sense, the exception is articulated as a tool for the recovery of normal functioning in the sociopolitical regime.

The biopolitics of disasters constitutes a strategic reservoir available in intervention devices. Its application aims to transform, adjust, or normalize urban space, particularly through the intensification of the exception. Regarding this manifestation of the biopolitics of the city, it is interesting to review the study by Boano and Martén (2013). Concerning the occupation of the West Bank, the research analyzes the development of forms of urbanism of exception, where power application becomes tangible spatially, influencing authority relationships, generating productive activities, exclusion rules, among others. In Chile, population control instruments, in disaster situations, outline this order through shelters or more recent figures like emergency housing clusters called “aldeas” (2010 earthquake case). Against these measures, the population resorts to traditional post-disaster recovery mechanisms, such as mutual aid among neighbors and solidarity food practices, like “ollas comunes” (community kitchens). These forms of community life contradict the biopolitical disciplinary order in disaster scenarios, as observed during the most critical phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in Chile (Castañeda, 2021)

Regarding life management, there is a need to safeguard and contain it to maintain power over it. In this context, we revisit two biopolitical possibilities based on Carballeda's (2012) note on the etymology of the word “intervention,” referring to both interposition and articulation. The former is associated with a biopolitics of security, characterized by disciplinary control of the collective in the city under disaster situations. In its other aspect, intervention can be paired with affirmative biopolitics, where life in the catastrophe configures the subject and not the object of power. In either of these two options, the biopolitical strategy for disaster intervention connotes the centrality of life in disaster cycles.



Conclusion

In summary, the biopolitical perspective on disaster in the city emphasizes the need to open theoretical-political debates beyond the technical implications of emergency management. Societies have complex designs of devices that regulate social life in conditions of normalcy, with demarcations in enunciative, operative, and ethical aspects. The transformation is a possibility within the intervention, immanent within the micro-physics of power (Foucault, 2019). Several definitions of social intervention agree on its transformative potential. However, the regulation of normalcy faces various crises requiring exceptional measures for effective intervention.

Urban disruption in disasters poses a problem for the political management of complexity. Disasters are nearly impossible to predict, often following random distributions or power-law distributions (Ferguson, 2021). The impact of disasters affecting cities poses a challenge to neoliberal governance, as it tends to favor issues of population control and security in the face of the seriousness of climate change. Recognizing biopolitical strategies in these processes enhances the understanding of discourses and practices associated with the intervention in this form of social crisis.

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Viewing disasters as crises (Azocar, 2018) allows for connections with methodological traditions in the field of social intervention, specifically models emerging in the 1940s. However, dimensions like community autonomy can be jeopardized by social intervention processes based on biopolitical strategies that emphasize control and security in affected cities. For this, the implementation of polycentric, adaptive, ascending, and diverse governance is recommended to prevent an increase in territorial vulnerability.

This places disasters as objects of practices, discourses, and materializations constituting social intervention devices. A suitable analytical framework, such as the biopolitical perspective, facilitates distancing from perspectives that limit the treatment of disasters to technical management issues. Researchers in social work have the concept of biopolitics in their references, but its application in the field of pre and post-disaster intervention is still in its early stages. Post-disaster intervention should consider the problems of overlapping biopolitical strategy with the survival interest of capitalist economy. Life is at the center of the capitalist development and restructuring policy (Rossi, 2013) during economic disruptions post-disaster.



Finally, for disciplines like social work, it is interesting to observe this matter from a governance of life perspective. In line with Jenson (2014), the purpose of this reflection is to influence new research on intervention in disaster situations, where possibilities and effects tend to radicalize under the principles of biopolitical exceptionalism reviewed in this article.

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