

Biopolitics in Crisis: Analyzing *The Wandering Earth* through Foucault and Agamben's Theories

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Abstract: This article examines the Chinese science fiction film *The Wandering Earth* as a biopolitical narrative shaped by an apocalyptic crisis. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben's concepts of sovereignty, bare life, and the state of exception, it argues that the film depicts a form of crisis governance in which collective survival is prioritized through disciplinary control and legal suspension. Michel Foucault's analysis of biopolitics helps illuminate how techniques of surveillance, normalization, and population management regulate bodies and optimize life in the interests of the state. Giorgio Agamben's political theory, by contrast, reveals how the normalization of the state of exception enables sovereign power to reduce individuals to bare life. By bringing these frameworks together, the article demonstrates that *The Wandering Earth* exposes the paradox of biopolitics as both a politics of life and a politics of sacrifice.

Keywords: Biopolitics; State of Exception; Bare Life; Sovereignty.

1. Introduction

The Wandering Earth is an apocalyptic science fiction movie released in China in 2019. It is adapted from Liu Cixin's novel of the same name. The basic setting of the movie is that the Earth's environment is deteriorating, and it is no longer suitable for humans to live in, so humans stick together to rescue themselves. They plan to escape from the solar system with the Earth to find a new place suitable for humans to settle down. This essay explores the implicit Biopolitics in the movie based on Foucault's theory of Biopolitics and Giorgio Agamben's theories of "Sovereign," "Bare Life," and "State of Exception".

In this movie, humans are facing the death of the Earth. "The sun is rapidly degenerating and expanding. The sun will engulf Earth in 100 years". Disasters are occurring on Earth: fires, droughts, extinction of animal species, tsunamis, and so on. People of all countries responded to the existential crisis together by ceding some of their rights and building "the United Earth Government" as the supreme sovereignty. "In order to maximize the chance of human survival, the United Earth Government or the UEG decided to propel Earth out of the Solar System to fly towards our new home located 4.2 light years away. This human migration is named as the Wandering Earth Project" [1]. To ensure the safety of the Earth's voyage, "The Navigation Platform International Space Station" was built to navigate the Earth. Pilots and mechanical engineers in various countries were selected to work for the space station. In addition, humans built 10,000 Earth Engines on the surface of the Earth to power Earth's navigation and constructed adjacent cities underneath the Earth Engines. Due to the rapid deterioration of the natural environment, the surface of the Earth is no longer suitable for humans to live. However, due to the limited living space in the underground cities, people draw lots to gain the chance to live there.

2. Interpretation under Foucault's Biopolitics Theory

Foucault emphasizes that biopolitics has not existed for a very long time but is a new political formation that developed

with modernity. Its central feature is the use of "biopower." The realization of this biopower is achieved through a series of "disciplinary techniques," which monitors, fosters, optimizes, evaluates, regulates, corrects, and transforms lives and their actions. Foucault introduced the profound concept of biopolitics, which includes two significant forms. The first one is "an anatomo-politics of the human body," which is "centered on the body as a machine". The second form is "a biopolitics of the population," which is "focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes" and is realized "through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls" [2].

The first form of "an anatomo-politics of the human body" consists of a series of "disciplinary technologies" such as medical discourse, medical institutions, and so on. By disciplining the human body, it establishes the physiological norms of the human body, which are standardized to serve the development of the capital economy. That is, to make the human body more productive economically or more in line with the interests of the sovereign. In *The Wandering Earth*, the selection of pilots and mechanical engineers for "the Navigation Platform International Space Station" is a discipline of the human body. When the most basic right of survival needs to be obtained by drawing lots for ordinary people, these selected talents are given the chance to survive directly because their physical or mental ability meets the interests of the "United Earth Government". Also, in the movie, Liu Qi's mother does not meet the interests of the "United Earth Government" because of her illness, and she passively loses the chance to enter the underground city. As a minor, Liu Qi needs a guardian to accompany him in living in the underground city. Liu Qi's father, Liu Peiqiang, was selected to join the Space Station and was given a place to survive. Therefore, the guardianship was between Liu Qi's grandfather and his mother, and Liu Peiqiang chose Liu Qi's grandfather to survive with Liu Qi because he believed his wife couldn't take care of Liu Qi. In terms of discipline, there are institutions such as the army or schools, and those institutions will convey reflections on strategy, education, and social order. These kinds of disciplinary institutions are also

represented in the movie. The first appearance of Han Duoduo in the movie is in a classroom in the underground city. The content of the class is a poem about “hope” and “spring”. However, at that time, the earth's surface was completely covered with ice and snow and in ruins, so it was impossible to recreate the old springtime scene. In addition, the image of the army also appears throughout the movie. They strictly control access to the earth's surface, and it is difficult for ordinary people to see the real scene on the surface of the earth. Ordinary people can only live in a world full of hope constructed by the “United Earth Government”.

The second form is demographic adjustment, which includes reproduction, births and deaths, levels of health, life expectancy and longevity, and all conditions that can lead to changes in these elements [3]. Through demographically based “techniques of security,” biopower aims to reduce the external and internal crises or risks to which the population is exposed and to ensure overall equilibrium to guarantee the security of the population. This biopower is mainly reflected in the plot of the movie, in which the “United Earth Government” decides to change its plans. When the Earth is infinitely close to Jupiter and is about to collide and be destroyed, the “United Earth Government” decides to give up “the Wandering Earth Project” and implement an alternative program, “The Helios Project”. The essence of this project was to give up all human beings on Earth and to stretch human civilization by having pilots bring hundreds of thousands of sperm and eggs from the Pilot Space Station to a new residence. With regard to “technology of security” for population control, the ultimate goal of national governance is always the security of the population as a whole, not the security of individuals. However, this plan is the continuation of a “human civilization without humans”, and if it is successfully implemented, it will only be the reproduction of human bodies without minds.

In addition to the two aspects of biopower, Foucault also proposed three approaches in which disciplinary techniques are implemented: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and the examination. Foucault describes the effect of “hierarchical observation” as “[making] it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly.” That is, creating a completely transparent space where every individual is under constant surveillance. The underground cities, the space station, and the Earth's surface are all such monitored spaces. Classrooms in the underground city feature sophisticated electronic surveillance systems, which Liu Qi deliberately disabled when he led Han Duoduo away. On the Earth's surface, particularly at the entrances to the underground city, military personnel maintain watch from platforms slightly elevated above ground level, enabling them to monitor the movements of all residents simultaneously. Within the space station, every individual's actions are similarly monitored. For instance, when the low consumption mode is activated, the system screens display whether each person has entered their respective hibernation pod.

The second approach is “normalizing judgement,” which uses “perpetual penalty” that “compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes” individuals, ultimately achieving normalization and assimilation [4]. Liu Qi's imprisonment for leaving the underground city without permission and driving a vehicle is an example of punishment for non-normative behavior. Similarly, when the low consumption mode was activated on the space station, the crew immediately followed orders and entered a dormant

state, while a newly arrived member was shocked by this behavior. This contrast demonstrates the effect of normalizing discipline.

The third approach is “examination”: “the examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement”. The process of discipline is a continuous standardization of training and evaluation. During this process, individuals are constantly objectified and subjected to knowledge, being exposed, displayed, and assessed. The individual is always surrounded by the gaze of surveillance. Meanwhile, “the examination also introduces individuality into the field of documentation”. For instance, when Liu Qi was urgently requisitioned for a mission, Wang Lei, as the leader of the task, quickly retrieved the file of Liu Qi's father, Liu Qiqiang, to verify whether Liu Qi, as a civilian, might pose a threat to the smooth execution of the mission.

3. Interpretation under Agamben's Biopolitics Theory

Unlike Foucault, who viewed biopolitics as a product of modernity, Agamben points out that biopolitics has been present throughout the development of Western democracy and that the political reality we are currently facing is merely a new stage in the course of political development. Agamben's politics of life is centered on three essential concepts: “Sovereign”, “Bare Life”, and “State of Exception” [5].

The “State of Exception” concept has a strict definition in politics and law. It refers to the state of exception or emergency in relation to the rules and norms of the law. Usually, when a country declares a state of emergency, it will take the necessary measures to cope with the emergency. Agamben's theory of “State of Exception” was influenced by the German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt, who innovatively introduced the term “State of Exception” into the field of political rule. Agamben inherits Schmitt's famous assertion that the sovereign is the one who decides on the state of exception and links the relationship between the bare life and the sovereign through the state of exception [6]. There are two states of exception in the movie. The first one is the setting of the movie: the Earth is facing the engulfment of the sun, and all human beings are facing an existential crisis. And this state of exception has become the normalized state of exception, which is a concept proposed by Benjamin because the destruction of the Earth is irreversible. The laws and political systems of the previous era cannot adapt to and cope with the current social crisis. Therefore, those orders are permanently suspended, thus realizing the normalized state of exception. The second is when the Earth is about to crash into Jupiter. This is the exception to the first state of exception. It is an “emergency situation” that happens during the course of the implementation of the “Wandering Earth Project”: the Earth is attracted by the gravity of Jupiter, and the two planets are about to collide. The “Wandering Earth Project” is interrupted by that, and the Earth encounters a new and more urgent crisis.

Schmitt argues that the sovereign is the one who decides on the state of exception and legitimizes its supremacy in the judicial order through the concept of the state of exception. Agamben argues that the sovereign, as the decider of the state of exception, is not only able to create law in the state of exception but also to declare a state of exception at any time, thereby suspending the law. In the first state of exception, the

world of humans faces a common crisis, and the countries around the world jointly establish “the United Earth Government”, which is the sovereign under the “state of exception”, as the supreme ruling institution of the current world. The sovereign also formulates “the Wandering Earth Act” to cope with issues occurring under a “state of exception”. When the second “state of exception” occurs, scientists within the “United Earth Government” draw a conclusion by calculating that the collision between Earth and Jupiter cannot be stopped. The sovereign immediately quits “the Wandering Earth Project” It starts “the Helios Project”, which is aimed at transporting the pilots and sperm and eggs stored in the space station to their new home to continue the civilization of humans. The “Wandering Earth Act” itself was created together with the “Wandering Earth Project”, and its goal is to allow as many humans as possible to survive on Earth. However, after the implementation of “the Helios Project” and the abandonment of the “Wandering Earth Project”, the “United Earth Government” still restrained the pilots under the “Wandering Earth Act” in the space station. When pilot Liu Peiqiang tried to take control of the spacecraft in person to help the humans on Earth, the “United Earth Government” froze his access to the station as a punishment for violating “the Wandering Earth Act”. The “contradictory nature of the legal rights exercised by “the United Earth Government” reflects the paradox of sovereignty: “the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order” [7]. Sovereign power suspends the law by declaring a state of exception, thereby achieving direct control over the individual.

Agamben proposed the concept of “bare life” based on the two types of ancient Greek life, “*zōē*” and “*bios*”. The former refers to the fact of being alive, which is a kind of bare life possessed by humans and animals; the latter refers to the good life possessed by individuals and groups or the political life in the ancient Greek city-state. In the political community, the “*bios*” is the protection for the bare life, allowing it to be temporarily exempted from the violent killings by the sovereign. However, when an individual is deprived of his “*bios*” and loses his political identity, he becomes an “exception” in the political community and can be killed at any time. The modern “state of exception” is a fictitious state of exception. It is inscribed in the Constitution's provisions on the powers of the sovereign and his government. It grants the sovereign and his government the right, “when necessary,” to act temporarily unconstitutionally, to suspend the law, to break down the distinction between legislative, executive, and judicial powers, and to have complete control over the nation [8]. It is on this basis that all citizens may at any time become bare life in the political community because the sovereign is the one who decides on the state of exception. In the movie, the bare life in the first “state of exception” is those who do not win the lottery and cannot enter the underground city. It seems pretty fair to choose who can survive by drawing lots, but the act of drawing lots is a suspension of the previous law by the sovereign, directly deciding on the “state of exception.” The bare life in the second “state of exception” is all human beings on earth. A new crisis arises, and the sovereign suspends the previous “Wandering Earth Act” and gives up the goal of protecting as many humans as possible. “The Wandering Earth Project” and “The Helios Project” seem to be the salvation of humans, but in fact they are new “concentration camps”, which are space for imprisonment and killing of bare life.

4. Comparison of The Two Theories

Foucault's theory centers on governmentality as the norm of the modern countries, and he argues that the product of the biopolitics is a large number of productive, submissive “docile bodies”. In the movie, Liu Qi initially questions and is reluctant to comply with the rules of the “United Earth Government”, such as the military's requisition of private vehicles, restrictions on access to the Earth's surface, and the idea that keeping the Earth Engine running is more important than individual's life [9]. By the end of the movie, however, Liu Qi has become a member of the army. The rules he had questioned eventually assimilated him. The “docile bodies” are the normal subjective state of the modern state, while the “bare life”, as politicized life, is the extreme subjective state of the modern state. Agamben (1998) argues that as long as the rule of “law + exceptions to law” is not broken, the citizens of the modern state will structurally become “bare life” at any time. In the movie, the initial law is immediately suspended when a crisis occurs on Earth, replacing it with “the Wandering Earth Act”; when a new crisis arises, “the Wandering Earth Act” is also immediately suspended. The correctness of the first legal suspension decision cannot be judged due to the limited depiction in the film. However, in the second suspension of the “Wandering Earth Act,” the decision made by sovereign power was not entirely based on the principle of protecting life. The “United Earth Government” believed that the chance of Earth escaping a collision with Jupiter was zero, because they did not include the sacrifice of the space station in the solution [10]. The film's ending also proves that the space station's involvement in the rescue could have saved the and all human on Earth. Therefore, the potential for human death was not caused by the crisis itself, but by the dictatorial control of sovereign power.

5. Conclusion

Foucault and Agamben's theories of biopolitics jointly reveal the dual facets of modern power operations: on one hand, Foucault's meticulous analysis of disciplinary techniques and population regulation exposes how modern society shapes individuals into docile and efficient life carriers through intricate power networks—such as the spatial surveillance, behavioral standardization, and identity checks depicted in *The Wandering Earth*; On the other hand, Agamben's philosophical critique of “sovereign,” “state of exception,” and “bare life,” exposes the hidden despotic core behind this seemingly rational governance system. That is, the sovereign's ability to suspend law and decide life and death under the guise of crisis, structurally rendering every citizen potentially sacrificial “bare life.” This mirrors the United Earth Government's power over life and death, demonstrated in the film through lottery draws and planned replacements.

Together, these perspectives identify the fundamental paradox of biopolitics: it is simultaneously a “politics of life” dedicated to optimizing, preserving, and perpetuating life, and a “politics of death” that achieves its goals through exclusion, sacrifice, and mortality. In the extreme scenario depicted in *The Wandering Earth*, this paradox is laid bare: humanity's collective pursuit of survival hinges precisely on the systematic abandonment of certain lives; and the grand promise of “civilizational continuity” never escapes the sovereign's implicit adjudication of life's worth. It is within this dialectical tension—between life and death, protection

and deprivation, inclusion and exclusion—that the essence of modern politics is revealed.

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