Trust, bordering and necro-racism

Nira Yuval-Davis

Disenchantment with government has fuelled the rise and rise of contemporary necropolitics

The issue of trust is foundational in sociology. Early political scientists such as Hobbs and Locke talked about the social contract as the foundation for social order; while the sociological imagination focused on what was necessary for people to trust any such social contract. For Durkheim it was the pre-contractual belief in the sacred; for Simmel it was trust and religiosity; for Weber it was charisma and vocation; for Tocqueville it was 'habits of the hearth'; and for Parsons it was social norms.[1]

I don't want to engage in a debate about which of these foundational sociological thinkers was right (if any). For me, what is important is the common element to all of them - the idea that society (to which Margaret Thatcher famously denied any possibility of existence) cannot exist without precontractual trust - whether it is based on religious or secular ethical and normative values and/or the affective bonds of belonging. This is what bonds people together - not only beyond their specific positionings and spatial locations, but also beyond their lifetimes (both before and after). Social order - and all the various different forms of social relations - cannot function without this. I would also argue, further, that pre-contractual social trust can help to regulate and restrain, at least to a degree, uneven power relations.

Different political projects of belonging construct different collectivities of belonging: a nation, a race, an ethnic or religious group, a class, a gender, or (groupings with more amorphic boundaries) 'the people', humanity and 'the planet'.

DOI: 10.3898/SOUN:88.01.2024

Such identifications, which enable people to trust in imagined communities - to use Benedict Anderson's term for nations, which can be used just as well for other collectivities of belonging - are the basis of any social solidarity, and, as so many of the founders of sociology argued, of the possibility of any social order.[2]

I am not arguing that today we live in a world of total social disorder in which all pre-contractual social trust has been broken. However, the bases for trust have been greatly eroded during the period of global neoliberalism. I agree with Nancy Fraser that today we find ourselves in an interregnum, post-functioning global neoliberalism, with no new global system in its place.[3] There is a major disenchantment with previous normative social and political regimes, but no viable - or potentially hegemonic - alternative basis for trust has emerged. This is causing, I fear, the rise and rise of contemporary necropolitics.

The double crisis of governability and governmentality

Let me explain what I mean. Although I am writing in generalities, my focus here is mainly on the UK and the rest of the global North, where there has been a growing double crisis of governability and governmentality, which I've been discussing since 2008 and the banking crisis.[4] This double crisis has greatly eroded the bases for sustaining popular trust in the social order.

The crisis of governability results from the fact that, in the era of neoliberal globalisation, governments no longer primarily represent the interests of their citizens; instead, their executives have been focusing on negotiations with inter- and supra-national organisations and transnational companies whose overall financial power and flexibility outstrips theirs a hundred times over; and, at the same time, this relinquishing of control to external forces has been accompanied by a growing privatisation of many parts of the welfare state, with the result that governments have relinquished some of their capacity for control over every-day social and economic functioning. These developments mean that states have greatly diminished means of governing. The crisis of governmentality follows on from this crisis of governability, because when people feel that their interests are not being pursued by their governments - even the most radical of governments - they feel disempowered and deprived. And after a while they also stop buying into the neoliberal common sense that tells them that it is their responsibility if they fail to be healthy and wealthy, to provide for their families or become part of the incredibly rich and famous.

Trust, bordering and necro-racism

This double crisis has been operating both locally and globally, and it has occurred at a time of growth in population mobility. And this coincidence of a crisis of government and increased levels of migration has had the effect of bringing to an end the technology of multiculturalism, which, since the second world war, has been the major technology for the control of diverse populations. In its place governments have increasingly adopted a top-down technology of everyday bordering;[5] and at the same time we have seen the bottom-up growth of autochthonic and fundamentalist identity politics.[6] These phenomena reinforce each other, causing a relentless growth in necro-racism and local and global violence. The retreat into identitarian collectivities, defined in relation to an 'other' and not necessarily connecting to a larger identification with a state, can be seen in this context as a turning towards alternative potential sources of trust; while the adoption by the state of new technologies for managing borders can be understood as an attempt to reassert control over the composition and security of their populations. Bordering connects to autochthonic identity politics, as it involves differentiating between people, making a separation between those who belong and those who do not.

Furthermore, the new bordering practices adopted by governments in the UK and elsewhere mean that borders no longer operate solely at the point where people move from one state to another: they have now spread, and are present everywhere. For migrants to the UK, borders start in faraway consular offices in which people are interviewed to decide whether or not they will be allowed to travel; they also operate through air and shipping companies, which are liable to bear the cost of any travellers transported by them who are turned away when they arrive at the UK border; and they continue everywhere within UK territory - in train stations, in workplaces, in people's homes. Ever greater numbers of citizens have been required to act as untrained unpaid border guards as part of their everyday working lives, and more and more of us are becoming suspects as illegal, or at least illegitimate, border-crossers.

This tendency has been developing for many years - since 9/11 if not before. But the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts in the UK, which have parallels in the legislation of many other states, have firmly embedded this technology in the British state. These Acts require that every landlord, every employer, every teacher, every doctor, is responsible for verifying that her or his tenants, employees, students or patients are legally in the country: they are legally responsible if they fail in this

duty, and may even go to prison for failing to act in accordance with these demands (unlike those who are trained and paid to do this job). We have thus moved away from a potentially convivial multicultural and diverse society, and are living with a technology of control that breeds suspicion and fear, and is increasingly sensitising people to the boundaries between those who belong and those who do not. The campaigning for and enacting of Brexit has subsequently enhanced this sense of differentiation and hierarchisation among people.

Autochthonic politics and new forms of racialisation

As discussed above, bordering can be understood as central to the top-down response to the double crisis of governability and governmentality; while the development of autochthonic and fundamentalist identity politics can be understood as part of a bottom-up response.

Autochthonic, or nativist, politics can be defined as the global return to the local. It is connected to a new kind of racialisation that has gained impetus during a period of globalisation and mass migration: a form of temporal-territorial racialisation, based on exclusion and inferiorisation, that reacts to the relatively new presence of particular people and collectivities in particular places (neighbourhoods, regions, countries). It differentiates between the 'autochthones', who belong, and the 'allochthones', who do not.

Autochthony is a much more 'empty' and thus more elastic notion than ethnicity. Ethnicity is a highly constructed concept, and is relationally and situationally circumscribed, but there are limits to constructions - and reconstructions - based on ethnicity with regard to name and history. Autochthony, on the other hand, states no more than 'I was here before you', and, as such, can be applied in any situation and can be constantly redefined and applied to different groupings in different ways. It combines elements of the naturalisation of belonging with a vagueness as to what constitutes the essence of belonging - and thus can be pursued by groups which would not necessarily be thought to be autochthone by others.

The notion of an autochthonic politics of belonging is very important when we come to understand contemporary populist extreme right politics in Europe and elsewhere. The people who follow this politics continually argue that they are

'not racist' - although they are very much against all those who 'do not belong'. The English Defence League, for example, has formal Jewish and Gay sections, as well as Hindu, Sikh and Afro-Caribbean supporters, which would be unimaginable in the older kinds of extreme right organisations with their neo-Nazi ideologies. This shift highlights the importance of understanding new forms of exclusionary politics through an intersectional analysis, and an understanding of the different constructions of class and gender, as well as race, ethnicity and nationality, that are involved in the constructed sensibilities of the - supposedly homogenous - victimised white working class.

An autochthonic politics of belonging can take very different forms in different countries and can also be constantly reconfigured in the same places. Nevertheless, like any other form of racialisation and other boundary construction, its discourses always appear to express self-evident or even 'natural' emotions and desires - the protection of ancestral heritage, the fear of being contaminated by foreign influences and so on - although these often act as a cover for very different notions of ancestry and contamination. Paradoxically, these supposedly localist sentiments are constantly fed by global social media and conspiracy theories, which spread with great speed from one continent to another.

An understanding of the complexity and situatedness of carriers of autochthonic politics can explain why the British conservative government that left office in 2024 was simultaneously the most ethnically and racially diverse the country has seen and the most racist, helping to normalise exclusion not only of so-called 'illegal' immigrants and asylum seekers, but also of any kind of immigrant of any ethnicity, even those who are vital to the country's economy. The entrenchment of a 'hostile environment' and practices of 'everyday bordering' have reinforced necropolitical technologies of 'Othering'. (These technologies are also mobilised in the violent and militarised pursuit of international policy, where they underpin a disregard of some groups as having lives that matter.)

Indifference as a context for necropolitics

In the work on bordering which I carried out with Georgie Wemyss and Kathryn Cassidy, we found that, as a result of prevalent practices of everyday bordering, more and more migrants are becoming suspended, before or after crossing the border, in 'in-between' grey zones: instead of border crossers, they have become

an embodiment of the border itself.[7] The fate of such people is symptomatic of the increasingly widespread contemporary phenomenon of necro-racism.

I, and many others, have been arguing for a long time that racism has two central logics: that of exclusion and that of exploitation. I used to say that the ultimate form of racist exploitation is slavery and that of exclusion is genocide. (In practice, of course, most forms of racism tend to be intertwined, often in complex ways.) However, I have recently realised that genocide is not the sole ultimate form of exclusion.

In genocide there is a named 'Other' collectivity, which is not only demonised but is also conceived as an existential danger for the physical or social/economic/cultural existence of the collective 'us'. We've most recently been hearing such a narrative by some of the leaders of the current Israeli government as a justification of its war on Gaza. But there is another form of ultimate logic - a necro logic - in which the 'Other' has no name, no identity, no visibility, and thus no entitlement for life, let alone any other human rights.

The work of Achilles Mbembe on necropolitics has greatly helped in understanding this form of racialisation. As discussed further below, Mbembe understands necropolitics as the use of social and political power to dictate how some people may live and how some must die.[8]

Many thousands of people have drowned in the last ten years in the Mediterranean sea, and thousands have perished in the desert in between Mexico and the US, to name just two recent occurrences of mass anonymous deaths which, in popular and/or hegemonic discourse, are not seen to count.

There have also been countless mass killings in Gaza since 7 October 2024;[9] for PR reasons, Netanyahu had called an earlier killing of many civilians in Rafah - in what was apparently intended as an targeted strike - 'a tragic mistake'.[10] But the usual term for such killings since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 has been 'collateral damage'; and the ratio of 'collateral' to 'intentional' damage has grown tremendously over the last two decades. Israel's growing use of AI for profiling potential 'terrorists' has enabled it to 'bolster[s] its ability to identify, locate, and expand target sets which likely are not fully vetted'.[11]

As Giorgio Agamben, following Hannah Arendt, has noted, for stateless people and non-citizens, the human rights domain should start precisely at the point

where their formal civil rights are not seen to apply, but it is usually exactly where their entitlement for rights stops.[12] Arendt, of course, was writing at a time when international refugee laws and the universal declaration of human rights did not exist; but, now that they do, states often spend much more money and thought on finding ways to avoid complying with these laws than in cultivating them. For Agamben, the victims of what I would call this form of racialisation were 'bare lives', a term that Arendt originally used. This was an important insight, though there have been criticisms of Agamben on the grounds that this terminology denies agency to the victims of this mode of racialisation, not to mention denying their histories, identities and belongings, the naming of which has come to be an important act of resistance.

Mbembe, through his work on necropolitics, has helped to put this form of racialisation into context. Necropolitics - social and political power deployed to dictate how some may live and some must die - encompasses more than a right to kill: it also involves a right to expose other people to death, and to determine the meaning and value of their lives and deaths. Mbembe's notion of necropolitics includes the right to impose social or civil death and the right to enslave others, as well as a number of other forms of political violence. Necropolitics is a theory of the walking dead, a way of analysing contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death, whereby some bodies are forced into states and locations between life and death. Mbembe uses the examples of slavery, apartheid, the colonisation of Palestine and the figure of the suicide bomber to show how different forms of necropower over the body (statist, racialised, through states of exception, martyrdom) reduce people to precarious conditions of life; to being temporarily or permanently stuck in grey zones, embodying bordering.

More generally we can link necropolitics to the development of global racial capitalism - 'accumulation by dispossession' to use David Harvey's term.[13] In the racial-capitalism narrative, racism is not a deviation but the underlying distributive principle of modernity, as well as the major source of the accumulation of Western capitalism, which facilitated modernity while simultaneously embodying it. This was accomplished through the exploitation, destruction and extraction of resources and commodities in the Global South; the dispossession of its peoples; and the exploitation of their labour, including that of Southern people located in the North. What Mbembe has added to this narrative is the argument that racialisation - in its

many forms - has been the underlying distributive principle not only of resources but also of the right to life and grievable deaths.

With the growing effects of the crisis of global neoliberalisation and de-regulation, as well as the partial privatisation of states, the situation has worsened - not just in many areas of the global South but also in the Global North. This is the context of the double global crisis of governmentality and governability that I have been discussing.

Some time ago, in a paper on theorising social identity, I made an attempt to distinguish between different forms of relationships between 'self' and 'non-self' - which are so important to the stories we tell ourselves and others about who we are and who we are not. I distinguished between 'me' and 'us'; me/us and 'them'; me and other 'Others'; and me and transversal us/them.[14] I don't have the space here for a detailed discussion of these different relational constructions - which are all relevant to this discussion - except to reflect on a very problematic assumption I made in describing the positionings of other 'Others' along a continuum, from close association and identification via indifference to rejection and conflict. In this constructed continuum, indifference occupied the middle, neutral, position: live and let live; we are not concerned or fond of you/don't want to associate with you, but we also do not carry any special enmity towards you. As long as you don't negatively impact my life, I do not care.

But when it is brought into relation with the concept of necropolitics, it can be seen that this indifference is not simply a question of giving space to the lives of others: it is responsible for the death of countless others. It is what exposes them to the death and the risk of death in the living-death spaces of the grey zones of bordering, 'collateral damage', and the super-exploitation of the defenceless.

A politics of care

To fight against these kinds of necro racism we need to enact a politics of care.

I usually try and end talks, papers and essays with some kind of message of hope, or at least with a quote from Gramsci on the need for both pessimism of the intellect - of which we have more than plenty of sources these days - and optimism of the will, or soul. My soul is not feeling very optimistic these days. This is why, instead of focusing on the politics of hope, I will end this article by calling on all of

us to focus on the politics of care. Instead of submitting to demands that we become unpaid, untrained border-guard citizens, we need to follow Joan Tronto's suggestion of becoming caring citizens.[15] After all, each of us requires care at the beginning and end of our lives, and very often at a number of points in between.

The politics of care comes in different forms. Indeed, issues of power, inequality and exploitation can be found in what has become 'the care industry'. However - in combination with the concepts of mutual respect and universal entitlement - it is care that forms the basis for trust and social solidarity. And I want to briefly highlight here two crucial, complementary, forms of the politics of care - though they are not reducible to each other. The first of these is the politics of transversal solidarity - of working together, beyond borders and boundaries, with those who share our values. The second is the politics of the defence of human rights, which includes the defence of the rights, dignity and - first and foremost - the lives of everyone.

However, to be able to engage in the politics of care, we need to concurrently seek to resurrect a degree of social and political trust. This involves taking risks.

And we need to also acknowledge that such risks are not evenly distributed.

Nira Yuval-Davis is Professor Emeritus and Honorary Director of the Research Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) at the University of East London. She is coordinator of SSAHE (Social Scientists Against the Hostile Environment) and has written widely on intersectionality, racism, belonging and everyday bordering, including, in 2019, with Georgie Wemyss and Kathryn Cassidy, *Bordering*, Wiley 2019. She is a member of the *Soundings* editorial advisory board.

Notes

1. See, for example, M. Rosati, 'Solidarity and the sacred: Habermas's idea of solidarity in a Durkheimian horizon', *Durkheimian Studies/Études Durkheimiennes*, 2000, pp93-103; E. Durkheim, *Emile Durkheim: selected writings*, Cambridge University Press, 1972; M. Weber, *Max Weber: selections in translation*, Cambridge University Press 1978; G. Fitzi (ed), *The Routledge International Handbook of Simmel Studies*, Routledge 2021; T. Parsons, 'The present status of "structural-functional" theory in sociology', in *The idea of social structure*, Routledge 2017.

2. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* [1983], London, Verso 2016.

3. N. Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism: How our System is Devouring Democracy, Care, and*

the Planet and What We Can Do About It, Verso 2023.

4. Nira Yuval Davis, 'The double crisis of governability and governmentality', *Soundings* 52, autumn 2012: https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/vol-2012-issue-52/abstract-7373/.

5. See Don Flynn, 'Frontier anxiety: living with the stress of the every-day border', Soundings 61, 2015. Free to view at: https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/vol-2015-issue-61/abstract-7486/.

6. For a more detailed discussion of autochthony see 'The double crisis of governability and governmentality', pp89-94. See also P. Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, University Of Chicago Press 2009.

7. N. Yuval-Davis, G. Wemyss and K. Cassidy, *Bordering*, John Wiley & Sons, 2019.

8. A. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Duke University Press 2020.

9. https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/06/1150856.

10. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cjjj26d0eqxo.

11. Brianna Rosen, 'Unhuman Killings: AI and Civilian Harm in Gaza', *Just Security*, 5 December 2023:

https://www.thejc.com/news/israel/netanyahu-acknowledges-strike-on-rafah-camp-was-tragic-mistake-brk8unrk.

12. G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, *Sovereign power and bare life*, Stanford University Press, 1998; H. Arendt, 'We refugees' [1943], in *International refugee law*, Routledge 2017.

13. David Harvey, 'The "new" imperialism: accumulation by dispossession', *Socialist Register* 2004; for racial capitalism see Cedric Robinson [1983], *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, University of North Carolina Press 2000.

14. N. Yuval-Davis, 'Theorizing identity: Beyond the "us" and "them" dichotomy', *Patterns of prejudice*, Vol 44 No 3, 2010.

15. J.C. Tronto, *Who cares?: how to reshape a democratic politics*, Cornell University Press, 2015.