Book launch/discussion: The Subject of Human Rights (SUP 2020)

Danielle Celermajer
May, 2021

When: 28 May 2021 / 9.30-11 am CET

Link: https://zoom.us/j/93210372616pwd=dTZZ...

ID: 93210372616

Password: 4JzWZ6

Danielle Celermajer and Alexandre Lefebvre (University of Sydney) will speak about their new book: “The Subject of Human Rights” (Stanford University Press 2020). Agathe Mora (University of Sussex) will be the discussant.

Abstract

The Subject of Human Rights is the first book to systematically address the “human” part of “human rights.” Drawing on the finest thinking in political theory, cultural studies, history, law, anthropology, and literary studies, this volume examines how human rights—as discourse, law, and practice—shape how we understand humanity and human beings. It asks how the humanness that the human rights idea seeks to protect and promote is experienced. The essays in this volume consider how human rights norms and practices affect the way we relate to ourselves, to other people, and to the nonhuman world. They investigate what kinds of institutions and actors are subjected to human rights and are charged with respecting their demands and realizing their aspirations. And they explore how human rights shape and even create the very subjects they seek to protect. Through critical reflection on these issues, The Subject of Human Rights suggests ways in which we might reimagine the relationship between human rights and subjectivity with a view to benefiting human rights and subjects alike.

See you on Zoom!

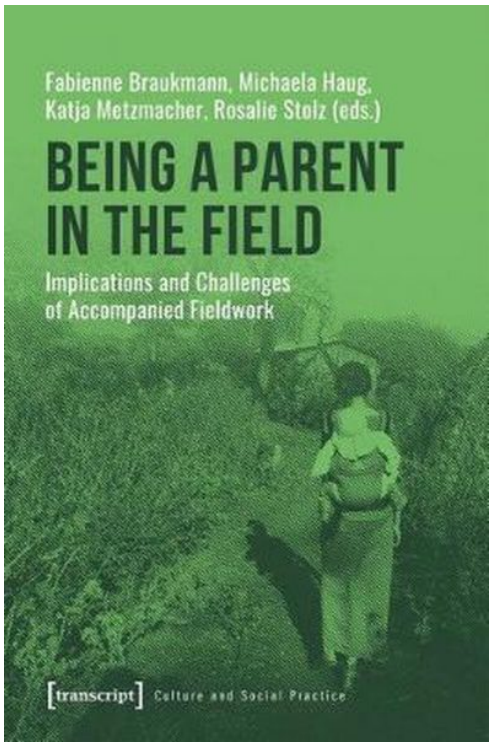
Here is the full schedule of the webinar series.
You can also access the webinar videos on Allegra's YouTube channel.

Being a Parent in the Field

Anna-Maria Walter
May, 2021

In 2017, my colleague Philipp Zehmisch and I had to cancel a panel on love and family relationships in ethnographic fieldwork, due to a lack of participants.

Fabienne Braukmann was one of the few researchers daring enough to expose her personal field entanglements at the biannual German anthropology (DGSKA) conference, so I am all the happier that the topic was subsequently taken up by her and a group of committed young scholars for a workshop at the University of Cologne in 2018 that culminated in this edited volume. Covering topics ranging from pregnancy to the long-term perspectives of anthropologist parents who bring one or more children and/or a partner to the field, the book addresses the practical challenges and epistemological chances of accompanied fieldwork.



Traces of an anthropologist's family sometimes appear in ethnographic writing as kin-ties to the field or in co-authorship by anthropologist spouses. In addition, many stories of researchers' building of rapport involve becoming 'kin' with some of their interlocutors. The problem of maintaining these ties over longer periods of time, however, has been less frequently recognised (Hughes & Walter 2021). While reflecting on the researcher's own positionality has come to be an essential part of ethnographic writing, there is a need to lay open the personal as well as more structural impediments of extensive fieldwork periods that are considered so integral to social and cultural anthropology. Just recently, the feminist *Manifesto for a Patchwork Ethnography* has received much attention with its call to rethink 'traditional' fieldwork. It was drafted by three aspiring women anthropologists in assistant professorship positions at US and UK institutions who are vocal about the challenges involved in balancing private and professional demands that inevitably reproduce the academic system's underlying gendered power relations. Male researchers who take an active role in family care work also increasingly face this dilemma. Besides the biographical and epistemological dimensions of accompanied research trips, the

editors of *Being a Parent in the Field*, namely Fabienne Braukmann, Michaela Haug, Katja Metzmacher and Rosalie Stolz, therefore express the dire need to raise awareness among funding agencies in relation to the prevalence of accompanied fieldwork.

> *Going along with local norms and practices might work well for oneself, but others imposing their opinions on how to raise one's child, even if well-intended, can push their anthropological sense of cultural relativism to the limit.*

While development agencies or international corporations self-evidently cover family expenses, most research funding (especially below post-doctoral level) does not include allowances for partners or family members, thereby forcing researchers to resort to private funds. Additional burdens include health considerations, emotional stress (whether due to the presence of children and/or a partner, or to extended periods of separation), the organization of childcare and schooling and the question of one's partner's role in the field. At the same time, most of the contributions in the volume acknowledge the fact that in many contexts, the researcher's social persona becomes more intelligible and relatable for interlocutors when they live within a family setting – despite the fact that academic knowledge production might be constrained by the dual load of family and fieldwork. Interestingly, quite a few authors mention that going along with local norms and practices might work well for oneself, but others imposing their opinions on how to raise one's child, even if well-intended, can push their anthropological sense of cultural relativism to the limit. Such "epistemic affects" (Stodulka, Dinkelaker & Thajib 2019) of shared experiences, similarities and differences appear in all of the 13 accounts in the edited volume.

In the first section of the book, *Positionality, Similarity and Difference*, Julia Pauli, Corinna Di Stefano, Simone Pfeifer and Michaela Haug trace their changing positions in the field, from women travelling alone, to spouses and mothers. In the early phase of anthropological fieldwork, self-immersion is a common experience

that is increasingly complicated by one's growing family. While Di Stefano struggles with the immediacy of her visibly "*unruly* pregnant body" (64), which constantly invited moral judgment and social (re)positioning, Pfeifer stresses the fact that a researcher is always shaped by her family ties, even when contact with family members is only maintained through communication technologies over distance. Emphasising the value of a long-term perspective, Haug describes how she has established a sincere closeness with locals over two decades of return visits, even though her lifestyle is increasingly less adapted to the ways of doing things in the village.

Although many chapters in the volume highlight how a fieldworker's child can suppress social, racial, and economic hierarchies because children "highlight our shared humanity" (171), several authors report that they agreed with their partners ahead of time to keep research and family life separate.

The next portion of the volume, with contributions from Tabea Häberlein, Rosalie Stolz, Anna Turin and Leberecht Funk, centres on *Producing Ethnographic Knowledge*. The authors here focus in particular on the entanglement of different forms of 'kinning', such as one's own biographical details and being accepted as a son or a daughter by interlocutors, as well as taking care of foster children. While accompanying relatives always shape a researcher's immersion in the field, Häberlein shows how fulfilling expectations of a foster mother and/or grandmother create a social persona that is strongly connected to the local context and consolidates legitimacy. Although many chapters in the volume highlight how a fieldworker's child can suppress social, racial, and economic hierarchies because children "highlight our shared humanity" (171), several authors report that they agreed with their partners ahead of time to keep research and family life separate. For Turin, this might have been the natural consequence of her work on infrastructure development. Others make more use of family ties, especially when their research concerns kinship-related themes – or children's emotions and their behaviour in peer groups, as in the case of Funk, who gained immense insights through the comparison of local children's

behaviour with those of his own children. At the same time, he felt guilty for using them as research tools. On the whole, his is a story of 'anxiety' and 'shame' resulting from a sense of failure to successfully integrate his family into rural Taiwanese society: he had to shoulder the emotional burden of his children constantly being laughed at and teased, and of his distressed wife, who did not share his anthropological fascination.

The third section of the book is entitled *Constructing the Field*; however, the specific allocation of papers was not always apparent to me, as many of the contributions pick up similar threads and speak to all three of the subsections. A recurring motif is the compatibility of parenthood and fieldwork, and with it the multiplicity of social roles as researcher, parent, spouse, etc. Schiefer reminds us not to forget that university-based academic work at home also poses challenges for parents. To reconcile the ideals of a 'good mother' with women's career paths, she calls for the moral support of relatives, mentors, and supervisors. While the social role of a woman seems to be defined as the mother in many of the field examples, the male anthropologists Krämer and Girke both identify the tension between their paternal responsibilities and what Max Weber called 'science as vocation', or the "anthropologist totale sociale" (Girke, 271) that demands full immersion in the field excluding any division between private and professional self. Although they were accompanied by their families in the field, they kept them separate from their research work. In Krämer's case, this meant accepting a commute to the actual field site. Girke, on the other hand, faced the challenges of being part of an anthropologist couple sharing the same field site and struggling to equally live up to the demands of their different research projects while sharing house- and care work.

> *Despite its deeply personal accounts, the edited volume does not drift off into navel-gazing but rather poignantly addresses a timely topic with immense epistemological value.*

In the Afterword, Erdmute Alber appreciates the effort to dispense with the

classical image of the male “heroic lonely single researcher” (280) by presenting refreshingly sincere and serious fieldwork reflections illustrating that a clear division between private and professional life does not exist. She suggests to trouble and extend the overall rather conventional accounts of heteronormative nuclear families via contributions that consider queer or non-biological forms of care. As Hollington shows through a revaluation of her linguistic recordings, it is upon ‘us’, the anthropologists, to recognise the truly messy, polyphonous and multimodal nature of social life. Moreover, acknowledging these complex ethnographic entanglements can productively blur the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Despite its deeply personal accounts, the edited volume does not drift off into navel-gazing but rather poignantly addresses a timely topic with immense epistemological value. Unfortunately, only a few of the chapters move the topic forward in an analytical way or introduce suggestions on how to overcome the various dilemmas that are presented and discussed. Throughout, the book generally takes on a more descriptive tone, which makes it very accessible and serves as basis for further conceptualisation. It is therefore not only a must-read for young scholars, to prepare them for potential future fieldwork scenarios, but it also contributes to the discipline’s joint effort to pave the way for smoother and more flexible life and research styles.

Braukmann, F; Haug, M; Metzmacher, K; Stolz, R. (eds.): *Being a Parent in the Field. Implications and Challenges of Accompanied Fieldwork*. 290 Seiten. Bielefeld: transcript 2020. ISBN 978-3-8376-4831-7

References

Günel, Gökçe; Varma, Saiba; Watanabe, Chika. 2020. “A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography” *Cultural Anthropology*.

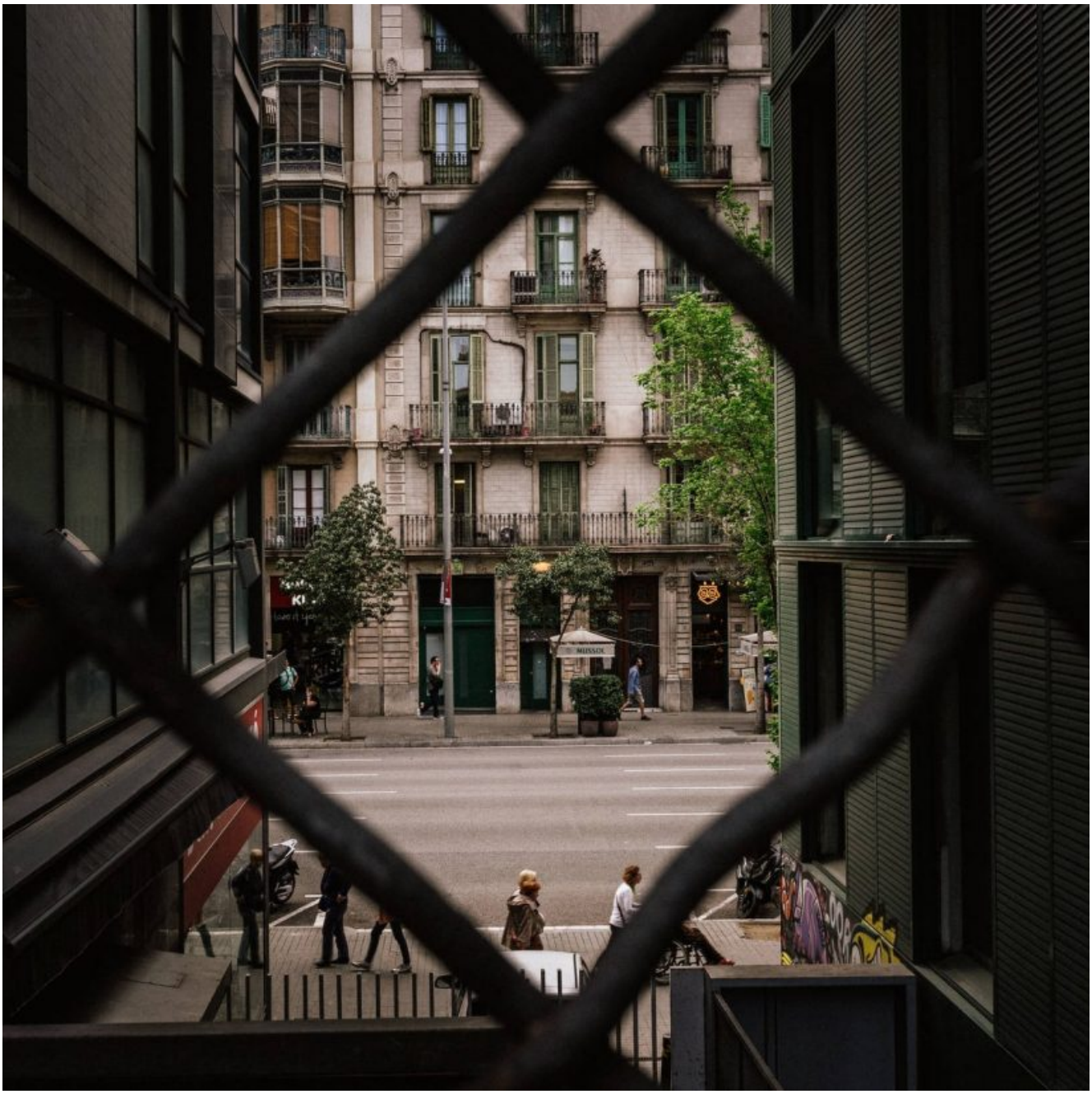
Hughes, Geoffrey; Walter, Anna-Maria. 2021. “Staying Tuned. Connections Beyond ‘the Field’.” *Social Analysis* 65 (1): 89-102.

Stodulka, Thomas; Dinkelaker, Samia; Thajib, Ferdiansyah (eds.). 2019. *Affective Dimensions of Fieldwork and Ethnography*. Cham: Springer.

Featured image by Tama66, courtesy of Pixabay.com

This safety asphyxiates us: The banal border in Barcelona

Corina Tulbure
May, 2021



Last month, while in Spain, we woke up to the news that local residents in the Canary Islands were planning to set up patrols to attack immigrants. In Barcelona, citizen patrols, without confirmed ties to far-right groups, have long demanded a greater police presence, threatening to “take matters into their own hands”, according to their social network announcements. They surveil people they consider a menace on public transportation. While both cases have been harshly criticised by journalists and politicians, it has become common for

members and sympathizers of far-right parties, such as Vox in Spain, to appear in mainstream media spreading racist messages. While these patrols provoke outrage and protest among many citizens in Spain, state violence against illegalised and racialized migrants has not resulted in mass disapproval. Instead, a branched "system" of surveillance of illegalised[1] migrants has formed in Spain that includes state institutions, right-wing sympathizers and citizen patrols. This surveillance is not managed by a particular organization, but it has spread throughout different government departments and it is put into practice through different forms of violence. Such surveillance practices dissolve reality itself and affects both people´s perceptions of it and of themselves.

This violence in Spain is part of a broader regime that operates throughout Europe. As a result of deadly migration policies, many people are forced to risk their lives by taking dangerous routes to Europe. In Tunisia, mothers of young boys who disappeared on their way to Europe are still waiting for their sons and demanding accountability. Thousands of people are deported from Europe each year or spend decades living under a *Departheid*[2] system that denies them access to basic rights. In March, activists in Madrid commemorated the loss of Mame Mbaye, who died during a brutal police raid in 2018. The Court dismissed the case brought against the police. On February 6th, 2014, fifteen people lost their lives near the border of Ceuta when Guardia Civil police officers fired rubber bullets at them. In 2020, the Spanish Court acquitted the police officers, concluding that they acted "in an appropriate way"[3]. People have died in migrant detention centres in Barcelona and Madrid with nobody having faced charges to date. We live with this reality every day and cannot claim ignorance. In spite of repeated mobilisations against these policies, national democracies are perfectly capable of turning a blind eye to the violence against migrants; in fact, they are producing it.

> *This violence in Spain is part of a broader regime that operates throughout Europe. As a result of deadly migration policies, many people are forced to risk their lives by taking dangerous routes to Europe.*

While the media's eyes are fixed on the European Union's external borders, the case of Spain shows that forms of violence are emerging inside the state. The nation-state imaginary is applied in banal, monotonous ways: meetings in offices, databases of illegalised people, day-to-day tasks executed by bureaucrats in the name of "prevention" and safety. In Barcelona, as in other major global cities, different sort of patrols, both institutional and citizen, monitor illegalised people's movements to create what the authorities consider a safe city. From "border-hunters" in Hungary, to neighbourhood patrols[5] targeting Roma people in Rome, to the Northern League's rhetoric on "reconquering public spaces"[6] , patrolling has become a normalised activity. These patrols operate with a frequency, range, and subtlety that transforms abstract concepts such as "safety", "citizen" and "migrant" into fearful visceral realities.

Barcelona presents itself as a "welcoming city", per the marketing messages of city council campaigns. Yet thousands of illegalised people are confronted by the police with guns, bureaucrats with stamps, encounters with citizens patrols, and with Spain's Law on Foreigners. Depending on the nationality of one's passport, once in Spain, a person may either be granted access to rights or be considered a non-citizen. The latter is achieved by denying access to rights. This fate typically leave poor and racialized "Others" living under constant surveliance and the threat of deportation. For the EU passport holders, some are treated as though they are Spanish citizens, whereas others are not, such as the racialized Roma.

On the Barcelona streets, police officers from three different forces protect this safe city: the *Policía Nacional* (national), the *Mossos* (regional), and the *Guàrdia Urbana* (local). In addition, plain-clothed institutional patrols, considered "street workers", walk up and down in the neighbourhoods, in a sort of social policing. Fear has taken over the city; it produces evermore fear, just as safety calls for more safety. In January 2021, shop owners in El Born, a white middle-class artistic neighbourhood, demanded that the City Council provide fewer police but also more "civic agents", institutional agents wandering the streets to surveil people´s public conduct. These civic agents, together with the other municipal street workers, monitor illegalised people. While the presence of uniform police

disturbs the visual amiability of the city, the “police without a baton”, as an elderly trader living on the street called them, municipal street workers, are in high demand.

In these precarious times, patrolling in Barcelona reassures official citizens that the municipal institutions still defend them from an imaginary Other. It reinforces the division between those considered citizens and those not granted this status. Simultaneously, the mere presence of these patrols induces the control not only of the illegalized people, their direct target, but also of official citizens. They become part of the surveillance system as they don´t denounce it. They are watchers and are watched at the same time.

In these precarious times, patrolling in Barcelona reassures official citizens that the municipal institutions still defend them from an imaginary Other. It reinforces the division between those considered citizens and those not granted this status.

The constant surveillance instils a permanent state of anxiety and a deep sense of alienation. We do not recognise ourselves when we are on the receiving end of this surveillant gaze. Invasive police body checks nullify our privacy at any moment. This totalitarian surveillance aims for a “control of the self that is permanent and at all levels, emotional, affective”[7] . At the same time, it instils a sort of blindness. A minor may be stopped five times in a single day by a patrol who ask him for his papers, put him through humiliating public rituals , and fail to see that he is just a young man, alone on the street. For the patrols, the problem is not that a child is living alone in the street, but the “threat” this child poses according to their criteria and perception. The vast majority of unaccompanied foreign minors end up on the street by 18 years of age since. Lacking a residency permit, close friends or income, police patrols strictly monitor them. One young man from Morocco explained clearly:

“When the police stop me, they keep saying: ‘We already know that you hang out with the boys, we know what you do’. But they are my friends, we all came from

Melilla, that's why I go to the square, I don't have any other friends. They check us, they throw us to the ground, yell at us: they do all this in public and people watch"

Patrolling ostensibly aims for public safety by means of prevention: prevention of conflict, prevention of exclusion, prevention of uncivic behaviour. Two laws frame "prevention". The first is the Law on Public Security, also known as the "*Ley mordaza*" or gag law, which punishes resistance to state authority as a criminal act, such as refusing to be stopped for a check. The second is a local directive known as the Directive on Civility, issued in 2005, which criminalises illegalised people working on the street.

> *Prevention aims to preclude a presumed future, criminal event but its effects occur in the present. It grants institutions free reign to engage in brutal interventions against racialized migrants in the name of safety.*

Prevention, however, gives a carte blanche for violent raids against illegalised people. If one is normally assumed innocent[8] until proven guilty, then in these Kafka-esque[9] preventive schemes "guilt is beyond question" As a trader from Senegal described *"Seven plain-clothes police officers jumped on me, and detained me, without a word. I was on the street, selling. I can´t complain. My only choice is to forget everything that happened."*

Prevention aims to preclude a presumed future, criminal event but its effects occur in the present. It grants institutions free reign to engage in brutal interventions against racialized migrants in the name of safety. These events are accompanied by violent police checks on public transport and a lack of any protection for those targeted, as filing a report would put them at risk of being deported.

Prevention and "civic policing" destroy social closeness, producing a form of loneliness based on 'watching' the other. The existence of this surveillance system, instilling an alienating reality, begs the question: why do those who

consider themselves citizens close their eyes to this violence? Why do they need to be protected? By whom and against whom?

Footnotes

[1] I use the term “illegalised” to stress that people’s situation is the result of an administrative process and a political decision.

[2] Kalir, B. (2019). Departheid. The Draconian Governance of Illegalised Migrants in Western States. *Conflict and Society*, 5, 19–40.

[3] https://www.elperiodico.com/es/sociedad/20200728/absueltos-guardias-civiles-acusados-muerte-inmigrantes-tarajal-8056933

[4] https://www.publico.es/actualidad/barbarie-invisible-centros-internamiento-extranjeros.html

[5] Ivasiuc, A. (2018). The Order of Things and People: Vertical NonState Surveillance, *The Open Journal for the Study of Culture,* 6: Surveillance Cultures.

[6] Dematteo, L. (2008) La ” défense du territoire ” en Italie du Nord, ou le détournement des formes de la participation locale. *Anthropologica,* 50(2).

[7] Fanon, F. (2018). *Alienation and Freedom.* Edited by Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C. Young. Translated by Steven Corcoran. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

[8] For relations between innocence, racial policing and social recognition, see Wang J. (2018), *Carceral Capitalism,* London: SEMIOTEXT(E) INTERVENTION SERIES.

[9] Kafka, F. (2009). *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories.* Translated by Joyce Crick. Oxford University Press

Featured image by Adam Jang on Unsplash.

Mediating Mobility: Migration and Brokerage at the Borders of the State

Natasha Raheja
May, 2021

Natasha Raheja (Cornell University) will present on ‘Mediating mobility: Migration and brokerage at the borders of the State’. Elizabeth Challinor (Universidade NOVA de Lisboa) will act as the discussant.

When: 21 May 2021 / 2.00-3.30 pm CET

Link: https://zoom.us/j/93210372616pwd=dTZZ...

ID: 93210372616
Password: 4JzWZ6

Abstract

In the western Indian city of Jodhpur, computer typists provide migration brokerage services to Pakistani Hindu refugee-migrants and street-level, Indian immigration officers. Such encounters and their interpretations offer an empirical counter-narrative to the Indian state’s emphasis on governmental proximity and immediate state-subject relations. Though computer typists are essential mediators, their acts of mediation are not always perceptible or acknowledged. Officers’ strategies of mediation obscure and expose middlemen in ways that entangle and disentangle brokerage as both part of, and distinct from, the everyday bureaucratic workings of the state. Officers’ shifting recognition of brokerage produces the fuzziness of the Indian state’s edges. Through the ambiguous ubiquity of their acts of mediation, middlemen come to embody the blurriness of where the state begins and ends.

See you on Zoom!

Here is the full schedule of the webinar series.
You can also access the webinar videos on Allegra's YouTube channel.

Inviting disasters

Eleni Kotsira
May, 2021

One particularly warm morning in September 2020, I am looking at photographs and videos in the media depicting the aftermath of medicane (Mediterranean hurricane) Ianós that just rampaged across Greece: communities invaded by mud and detritus, flooded households, bridges and roads cut off. Captions accompany these visuals: ‘destructive flooding’, ‘biblical disaster’… I would have preferred to feel shocked, overwhelmed by such visuals and descriptions; however, this all feels too familiar. I sense again my feet sinking in the moist mud and my

drenched clothes sticking to my skin. Suddenly, it is not September 2020 anymore. Instead, it is 26 September 2017 and I am staring across the deluged village of Chóra on the island of Samothráki. Water is endlessly rushing down its alleys, and the rocks that have detached from the mountain above the village have altered the landscape beyond recognition. What can the struggle of a remote and underpopulated island such as Samothráki to recover from a 'natural disaster' expose about our handling and understanding of disasters in Greece?

Extreme weather events have been steadily increasing across Greece in the past years. To list just a few:

- 14 November 2017 on the island of Sými;
- 15 November 2017 in Mándra, West of Attica – *24 people die*;
- 26 June 2018 in Mándra (again) and the neighbouring towns Néa Péramos and Mégara;
- 11 July 2019 in Chalkidikí – *7 people die*;
- 25 November 2019 in Kinéta, West of Attica (again);
- 9 August 2020 in Evoia – *8 people die*;
- Between 18 and 20 September 2020, Ianós hit about half of mainland and island Greece – *3 people declared dead*.

In spite of the diversity of these locations, the pattern is the same: eroded or burnt mountains collapsing under the unprecedented force of pouring water and/or sprawling urban expansion altering the natural flow of rivers. But does that mean that authorities have learnt from this and are prepared to act? The catastrophic rainfall on Samothráki, which I would call a deluge due to its magnitude and prolonged impact across the island, exposed critical inefficiencies of the national state of emergency plan at the time, *Xenokrátis*. Two aspects of this are of particular interest here: the material conditions that turned an adverse weather phenomenon into a 'natural disaster' and the emotional impact of the disaster on the islanders. Both are related with the lack of preparedness on behalf of the state for these type of disasters.

While extreme weather phenomena may appear as a relatively new challenge for the Greek experience, elsewhere they have long been the norm. Certainly, even those response mechanisms that have been developed from substantial experience with disasters, can fall short of the circumstances at times; Hurricane Katrina being perhaps the most obvious example to mention here. It was one thing not to know how bad Katrina's landfall would be for New Orleans in 2005 (see Remley, 2015), but it would have been completely another matter not to have known that the hurricane was coming at all. This is precisely what happened on Samothráki in September 2017. There is no meteorological station on Samothráki and, due to its mountain's high altitude (1,611m. in a surface area of only 180km^2) measurements provided by near-by stations in the mainland are not always accurate and/or not representative of all sides of the island. It is telling that the islanders talk of 'three weathers' on Samothráki, meaning three weather systems developing according to one's position relative to the mountain. The deluge that took place between 25 and 26 September 2017 was essentially an unforecast one, since the weather reports for that day only signalled the occurrence of light rain.

> *The morning following the stream's overflow, many villagers commented that 'Kamára is awaken again' when they saw that side of the village had been literally washed off.*

The following day, as rainfall stopped at sunrise, the impression of those who could walk out of their homes was that there would definitely be casualties; and yet there were none. A key factor that attributed to this was that the second and most intense squall broke out in the first morning hours of 26 September, when there was limited traffic outdoors. But infrastructure played perhaps a more decisive role. Because Chóra is characterised as a 'traditional settlement', most of its buildings, even when renovated, maintain their original structure; a structure based on thick stone walls – as thick as 1,5 metre each – almost impossible to be carried away by the force of water. Newly built premises are generally of good construction too. By contrast, anyone who drives through the towns of West Attica such as Mándra will probably notice the cheap infrastructures and the unfinished

housing complexes, parts of which were either carried away by the torrents that rushed through the town on 15 November 2017 or gave in and had their interiors quickly flooded. Faulty infrastructure can intensify dramatically the impact of flooding, as a number of cases make evident. In Chóra the Town Hall – in particular the additions made to it throughout the years, not the original skeleton of the building – and the tourist alley are built over the stream of Kamára, which in the past decades was considered a dry one. The morning following the stream's overflow, many villagers commented that 'Kamára is awaken again' when they saw that side of the village had been literally washed off. The old highway running through West Attica, still used to this day to connect the local towns with each other and open to drivers travelling between central and southern Greece, is built above two riverbeds flowing from the outskirts of Mándra, blocking their way to the sea. Or, looking into what more recently happened in the Greek city of Karditsa, Thessaly, one finds out that the Health Centre of Mouzáki, a wing of which collapsed during the passing of medicane Ianós, as well as other public buildings such as – again! – the Town Hall, were also built on top of a riverbed.

Yet, most built premises on Samothráki stood as a protection against the 'natural disaster' in the making, but in Mándra and Karditsa these were part of the disaster: the residents were vulnerable just by being inside their houses. Vulnerability to 'natural disasters' emerges from conditions that are far from natural but rather are the result of human activity and decision-making. Even when danger is expected 'some elements of a society still may not be in a position to take the necessary steps to mitigate or prevent the occurrence of a disaster' (Oliver-Smith, 2002, p. 42)

> *Islanders were put in a vulnerable position when they had to deal with the aftermath of the deluge in absence of relevant mechanisms that could assist restoration and orientate future action.*

My research on Samothráki showed that the residents, albeit safe in the homes, were also put in a vulnerable position by the lack of meteorological instruments to

forecast the deluge, combined with the island's remote location. The latter meant that technical support, advanced equipment for preliminary infrastructural restoration (such as unblocking cut off villages and roads) and additional personnel from the fire department and the army could only arrive on the island via the ferry, a mode of transport highly dependent on weather conditions. Most critically, the islanders were put in a vulnerable position when later they had to deal with the aftermath of the deluge in absence of relevant mechanisms that could assist restoration and orientate future action. The deluge was indeed caused by the intensity of the rain, but the island flooded and the disaster occurred because of decades of deficiencies in public works, lax regulations and laws regarding overbuilding, misplaced infrastructures and inadequate (or misjudged) rural planning; the Town Hall and the tourist alley being typical such examples. Similar reasons have contributed to the disasters that I referred to here for comparison, in West Attica and Karditsa.

'Natural disasters' are not just becoming more frequent and stronger in Greece, but also 'habitual' (Seremetakis, 2019, p. 70), a new sensory experience invading what was previously thought of as ordinary. More than adding a burden on the national budget, buildings and infrastructure collapsing against the force of water stigmatise the ones who have lived through the disaster.

From Sunday 30 September to Monday 1 October 2018, an area of low pressure passes above Samothráki; a medicane named Zorbás. On Sunday it rains for most of the day and on Monday thick fog covers Chóra for several hours. A couple of days later, I walk into one of Chóra's cafés to be taken aback by someone's shouts: 'The other day it rained and for some of us our heart was trembling… Next time it rains, the water will come from the mountain into our buildings! We are living among the shit!' The central pipe of Chóra's sewerage (see Photo 2), lies always open just a few metres away from us. The restoration works, which have started is Spring 2018 and were supposed to be complete within 40 days, are still undergoing. I am not aware if there has been some leak earlier in the day

that has fired the general tension admittedly spread in the atmosphere now, but as the shouts echo on the mountains surrounding Chóra, an odour captures our nostrils. What follows is a wave of faeces-fed flies rising from the burst pipe.

> *The historic absence of mental health and wellbeing services on Samothráki as well as the island's continuous dependence on the ferry connection to access basic services in the mainland, meant that no psychological support was sent by the state in the aftermath of the disaster.*

When I completed my fieldwork, almost a year and a half after the deluge, I could still witness fear outbreaks following intense weather events; unprescribed or homeopathic medication was still exchanging hands; and the weather forecast was always watched in absolute silence when reporting considerable rain. Sometimes these behaviours were expressed in public and were shared by several islanders being present at the particular moment, such as silence falling over the traditional cafés (*kafeneia*), being otherwise the hubs of communal life on the island, while the regulars would listen to the weatherman. Patterns of such behaviours (varying from avoidance of external reminders related to the deluge such as the very sound of running water, to a persistent negative emotional state and even flashbacks) can be found catalogued as symptoms of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), though it is very difficult to determine them as such in the case of Samothráki. And that is precisely the problem. The historic absence of mental health and wellbeing services on Samothraki as well as the island's continuous dependence on the ferry connection to access basic services in the mainland, meant that no psychological support was sent by the state in the aftermath of the disaster. Even if people were indeed experiencing PTSD symptoms, they were unable to seek any professional help, either because counselling was not embedded in their daily options and/or due to their restricted finances (to pay a return ferry ticket to the mainland as well as their therapist sessions weekly or fortnightly).

Interestingly, post-disaster psychological support was later arranged for places

where flash floods had resulted in loss of life, such as in West Attica and Evoia mentioned above. This is clearly underplaying the rest of the factors that can just as well cause emotional distress: the daily sight of what has become a deserted Town Hall, its windows still broken; the odours coming from a burst sewerage; the sound of running water awakening memories of trying to escape the deluge. Depriving disaster survivors of the means and the resources required to have their trauma recognised and addressed, going as far as to deny the possibility of post-disaster trauma occurring where no casualties have been reported, is just as good as forcing them to relive the disaster day by day. It can also perpetuate the long-standing stigma associated with mental health discourse and mental illness in Greece, which is still affecting a wide spectrum ranging from personal relationships to professional recruitment (Tzouvara et al, 2016). Essentially, it is discriminating between the ones who, given their financial ease, can afford private counselling (usually keeping their sessions secret) and those who cannot afford this but also cannot demand a public provision for it because they do not want to be associated with a mental illness or emotional distress. The divide between locations nearby or with easy access to the capital and remote places like Samothráki further deepens, confirming the islanders' complaints that 'decisions are usually made for us but without us'.

> *…no recovery is possible as long as islanders still worry about or even fear the sound of rain.*

Three years on, most restoration and refurbishment works have been concluded in Samothráki. The roads are indeed fixed now and new sewage pipes have been installed. The Town Hall has been relocated. Yet, no recovery is possible as long as islanders still worry about or even fear the sound of rain. And this fear will not be adequately addressed until the socioeconomic conditions putting the island's population in a vulnerable position are tackled.

Ackowledgements

Special thanks to my colleague at the University of St Andrews, Antonio Montañés Jiménez, for his feedback and comments on an earlier version of this article.

References

American Psychiatric Association (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. [Online]. 5th ed. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association. Available from: https://doi-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596

Oliver-Smith, A. (2002) Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture. In: Hoffman, S. M. & Oliver-Smith, A. eds. *Catastrophe & Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster*. Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, pp. 23-47.

Remley, Th. P., Jr. (2015) Counseling in New Orleans 10 Years After Hurricane Katrina: A Commentary on the Aftermath, Recovery and the Future. *The Professional Counselor.* 5 (4), pp. 431-441.

Seremetakis, N. C. (2019) *Sensing the everyday: dialogues from austerity Greece*. Abingdon, Oxon & New York: Routledge.

Tzouvara, V., Papadopoulos, C. & Randhawa, G. (2016) Systematic review of the prevalence of mental illness stigma within the Greek culture. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*. 62 (3), pp. 292-305.

How does/did Modi do it? The significance of ‘decisionism’

John Harriss
May, 2021

An introductory note: In the short space of time that has elapsed since I first drafted this essay – in the last week of March 2021 – and the present (the beginning of May), when I am responding to the helpful criticism of a reviewer, India has moved into an unprecedented crisis. The country had seen COVID-19 infections peak in mid-September 2020, and by the beginning of 2021 it appeared that the pandemic was well under control. The idea that ‘herd immunity’ had been reached, certainly in the major cities, did not seem fanciful. But towards the end

of February reports began to come in of case numbers increasing again. On April 4 the numbers of new cases of COVID-19 reported in one day passed 100 000, overtaking the earlier peak of September 2020. Ten days later the figure passed 200 000, and then on April 21 312 731 new cases were reported, the highest daily count ever recorded, in any country. The numbers have continued to increase (over 400 000 at the time of writing) and the projection of half a million new cases a day by mid-May begins to seem realistic. Images of people searching desperately for oxygen cylinders, reports of even middle class people who have access to top-class private health care being unable to find a hospital bed for a family member, and photographs of funeral pyres stretching as far as the eye can see, have been flashed across the world.

It has been reported internationally, too, that the Government of India headed by Narendra Modi was complacent about the pandemic being under control, and has been irresponsible in such ways as having allowed massive election rallies to take place in a number of states, some of them addressed by the prime minister himself, and without even a pretence of physical distancing or of face-masking. The city of Kolkata, where one in two people now are testing positive, has suffered in particular because of the numbers of such 'super-spreader' events. It has been recognised, too, that in spite of its earlier boast about India's standing as the vaccine producer for the world, the Government of India's own vaccination programme is in shambles. Modi's government has been described by a normally sympathetic journalist as 'missing in action', and one academic commentator, Sumit Ganguly, writing in The Washington Post on April 29, has suggested, "the Modi government may have finally met its Waterloo". This judgment seemed to be confirmed on May 2 with the news of the massive defeat inflicted on his party in the West Bengal state elections, in which Modi had campaigned so prominently. It is possible, therefore, that I should rephrase my original title to the past tense: 'How did Modi do it?' It is equally possible, however, that such is the degree of control that Modi exercises through the performance of leadership that I refer to as 'decisionism', together with the successful suborning of institutional checks on his exercise of power and his dominance of the media, he will weather this crisis.

Not yet ‘Waterloo’, therefore. More ‘the retreat from Moscow’ – when, of course, thousands of French soldiers died by the way. The analysis that is offered here may prove not to be of only historical interest.

> *Images of people searching desperately for oxygen cylinders, reports of even middle class people who have access to top-class private health care being unable to find a hospital bed for a family member, and photographs of funeral pyres stretching as far as the eye can see, have been flashed across the world.*

Narendra Modi presents many different images of himself, at different times and for different audiences, sometimes for instance he is the ‘chaiwallah’ – the tea-boy – or the man from a humble background who has made it to the top in the face of opposition from the old elites who have denigrated him. Or sometimes he presents himself as a leader – in a smart business suit, perhaps – who is dedicated above all to national economic development. But it is the image of the protector of ‘the people’ (the Hindu people) that counts most. In this guise, he has won the trust of very many Indians, who have effectively ceded political power to him. There is good reason to believe that Modi won the 20I9 election through the military action that he took against Pakistan in February of that year, acting then as the ‘chowkidar’ – the watchman – looking after national security.

Then, and at other critical moments – certainly that of the abrupt lockdown of March 2020 as the Covid pandemic took off – Modi has exhibited what the German jurist, indefatigable critic of liberalism, and prominent member of the Nazi party Carl Schmitt, called ‘decisionism’. In the aftermath of the conflict, confusion and uncertainty of the years of the Weimar Republic, Schmitt and other German intellectuals sought to justify the decisive actions taken by Hitler and the Nazi party. What mattered, they believed, was the act of decision itself on the part of the political authority, and its validity was given by its style rather than by its content. In a society, like Germany in the 1930s, torn by deep ideological and social conflict, Schmitt argued that sovereign decision was desperately needed.

Similarly, in present-day India the performance of bold and decisive leadership is what many people look for in circumstances perceived as drift and uncertainty – as Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party characterized the later years of the last Congress-led government – or in the context of danger such as that presented by coronavirus. I emphasize 'performance' because of the striking resemblance between Hitler's use of theatre and spectacle and Modi's reliance on sheer drama to galvanize majoritarian support. Most immediately, we must ask how has decisionism worked in the context of the coronavirus pandemic?

In spite of the claims of India's Home Minister , Amit Shah, that "India, under prime minister Modi, has fought the most successful battle against Covid-19 in the world" (reported in The Hindu, January 16 2021), the evidence – even before the onset of the current terrible crisis – clearly showed otherwise. Shortly after Shah spoke, the Lowy Institute published an index covering the performance of 98 countries in relation to six variables over the 36 weeks that followed each country's one hundredth confirmed case of COVID-19. India was ranked 86th. At least this was eight places ahead of the United States, but it was still seventeen places lower than arch-enemy Pakistan. In common with India's other South Asian neighbours, Pakistan had experienced fewer deaths, relative to population, than India. It is true, of course, as Narendra Modi and some of his ministers have regularly argued, that India has experienced relatively fewer deaths than wealthy western countries, but the comparison with the neighbouring countries – conveniently ignored – is more telling.

> *No thought had been given to the very many migrant workers employed in Indian cities, most of them paid only daily wages, or earning similarly small amounts from self-employment, or to what they would do when employment possibilities so abruptly ended.*

It is not only deaths due directly to COVID-19 that are significant. The lockdown that the Modi government imposed on March 24th last year was announced with

just four hours notice and with no preparation at all. The chaos that resulted made for a spectacle that was reassuring for middle classes. No thought had been given to the very many migrant workers employed in Indian cities, most of them paid only daily wages, or earning similarly small amounts from self-employment, or to what they would do when employment possibilities so abruptly ended. Millions sought to return to their mostly rural homes, walking and cycling along the highways and the rail tracks. They were offered, in the end, pitifully inadequate and poorly delivered relief, even while often being subjected to police brutality. There are, most likely, as many 'invisible' deaths as those due to the virus, because of the impact on livelihoods of the way the government mismanaged the pandemic, in the context of a weak health system. India has long under-funded public health care in relation to almost all comparator countries, and the government's failure to strengthen health capacity in the pandemic has now been brutally exposed The Modi government can be held responsible for 'social murder', as Engels spoke of this in The Condition of the Working Classes in England in 1844:

when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet too early and an unnatural death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by sword or bullet … its deed is murder (1943[1892]: 96)

Yet, people who lost their livelihoods last year were reported as saying 'Modi is looking after us', and that without the lockdown things would have been much worse. Approval ratings for Modi remained extremely high and steadily ahead of those of other world leaders throughout 2020. How does he/did he do it?

> *Whether the actions that are taken by an authoritarian populist like Modi really make for greater security is much less significant than the performance of decisiveness that relieves peoples' anxiety. The performance of decision works wonders.*

Five days before the dramatically enacted lockdown decision of March 24, in a

televised address Modi called for a daylong ‘janata curfew’ on March 22. He asked people to come out of isolation at 5.00 pm to clap their hands or bang thalis (metal plates) to applaud those working in essential services. This was the first exercise in political theatre that Modi set up early in the pandemic to build a sense of national solidarity around a focus on himself, as the protector of ‘the people’. A second event took place on April 5 2020 when he called on everyone to light lamps and candles for nine minutes at 9.00pm, to show national unity in ‘challenging the darkness’ of coronavirus. Once again, very large numbers of Indians complied. This second event followed the high drama of the lockdown decision, taken by the prime minister after very little consultation, and giving people much less warning than they had been given about banging their thalis. Then, in spite of its failure, attested by the government’s own advisory committee, Modi extended the lockdown several more times. While it was going on the government announced relief packages that economists showed to be very small in comparison with other major countries, but were associated with high-flown rhetorical claims. The prime minister’s allegedly decisive leadership was lauded. Whether the actions that are taken by an authoritarian populist like Modi really make for greater security is much less significant than the performance of decisiveness that relieves peoples’ anxiety. The performance of decision works wonders. Such apparently exceptional action is a key characteristic of charisma.

In early 2021, it seemed that the dramatic lockdown decision of March 2020, and the theatre surrounding it, had worked, and that the pandemic was well under control. Whether government action itself led to the steadily declining numbers of cases after the September peak was a matter for scientific debate, but it justified claims like that of Amit Shah, quoted earlier. The current crisis, however, exposes the government’s hubris , in which – thus far – Modi has been, for the most part, remarkably silent. His public statements have blamed the crisis on people’s failure to follow Covid behavioural protocols. “We must protect ourselves from lockdown”, he has said, by respecting Covid-appropriate behaviour; he has promised that youth groups in every neighbourhood will ensure that people show that respect. The prospect of state-sponsored vigilantism is ominous. The Health

Minister, meanwhile, has blamed the states; state governments led by Modi's party, the BJP, have blamed bureaucracy. The response of the BJP government in the very big state of Uttar Pradesh, which is headed by a prominent Hindu religious leader, after having first been to deny the crisis, has more recently moved to intimidation. People who have sought help through messaging on the internet have been threatened with legal action on account of their having an 'intent to cause fear'.

Where is it all leading? Decisionism has been exposed, perhaps, and it seems likely that, just as happened in Germany in the 1930s, Modi will rule increasingly through fear.

Bibliographic note: I have discussed the way in which the Modi government acted in the early months of the pandemic in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 79 (3), August 2020; the ideas that the lockdown became a spectacle, and that the Modi government is responsible for 'social murder' are developed by Alf Gunvald Nilsen in an article published in The Boston Review, March 24 2021; the idea that Modi exhibits 'decisionism' was first suggested in a prescient note by the late M. S. S. Pandian with Satyaki Roy (2014), published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49 (25), very shortly after Modi first took office as prime minister.

Featured image by Govind Krishnan on Unsplash

Totalizing Infrastructures:

Statecraft in the Uyghur Penal Colony

Darren Byler
May, 2021

There were three lanes at the checkpoint in Turpan—an old Uyghur-majority oasis

city on the northern reaches of the Taklamakan Desert in Northwest China. Two lanes were fitted with turnstiles, ID and face-scanners, metal detectors, and “data doors” which matched the SIM card of cell phones to the IDs of individuals. The third lane, on the far left, went through a simple metal gate. It was opened by a Uyghur police assistant, who looked at the faces of the people lined up behind it. Only people who appeared to be Han were permitted to exit through the third lane. They did not show their IDs to the police assistant. The ethno-racial phenotypes of their faces were enough. Speaking in Uyghur to people around me I noted that two of the lanes were for “native” people (in Uyghur, yerlik) while the other lane was for settlers. Continuing, I said, “I’m not native or Han, so which line should I go through?” The Uyghur women next to me smiled slightly—a mix of embarrassment, nervousness and irony flashing across her face—at what my question implied. The framing of my question, something that is not often said out loud in public, made clear that the natives were being subjected to scans because of their ethno-racial difference, their belonging to this colonized Islamic landscape in Northwest China.

She suggested I go through the “native” line. When I got to the front of the line a few minutes later, I told the Uyghur police assistant in Uyghur that I did not have a Chinese ID, I just had a passport. Responding to me in Uyghur, he said he would have to register me manually. As we walked to the police station he asked where I was from and how I learned Uyghur. I told him I was an American anthropologist who had lived in the Uyghur region for two years and that I had learned to speak Uyghur in the capital city, Urumchi. He said he had studied English when he was in school, but he had forgotten most of it because he had no one to practice with. As we approached the door he asked abruptly if I also spoke Mandarin Chinese. I responded in Chinese, “Of course.” As we entered the police station, I understood why he asked this question. We were entering a Chinese-speaking world. He led me to a Han officer and explained that I needed to be manually registered. The woman behind the desk scanned my passport picture and raised her smartphone to scan my face. I asked why she needed to scan my face. She responded, “It’s just to keep you safe.”

In regions of contemporary states where such totalitarian infrastructures are implemented, they produce dispositions or patterns of propensity that arbitrate the possibilities of life itself.

As this was happening, a pale-faced Uyghur young man was led into the station behind me. His ID had caused an alarm as he went through the checkpoint. His hands were shaking and he stuttered while he tried to explain why his ID had set off the system. I did not have time to stay and find out what was to be done with him. My privilege as a passport-carrying foreigner meant that a pathway through the flexible enclosures of the policing system was opened up for me, just as they were being opened for Han settlers at the checkpoint. At the same time, the face and ID of the young man had set off the alarms of the system and the walls were closing in around him.

Michel Foucault (1997) has argued that the enframing effect of architecture is what makes it effective in the enactment of power relations at the grass-roots or capillary level of society. Building on this approach, the anthropologist Allen Feldman (1991) argues that power is not in fact "distributed" from a center of power held in reserve as much it is enacted through a "metonym of doing." Power, defined as the ability to affect another and be affected, is enacted not by a unitary state, but rather discrete acts of doing within the architecture of a state. It is here at the jurisdictional boundaries of state institutions—for instance at a checkpoint in Turpan—that the material experience of the state is given structure and significance; movement is regulated; the environment is controlled. The structures of walls and gates, and the infrastructures of surveillance, open up certain forms of movement while foreclosing others. The policing and carceral systems that surveillance systems both symbolize and support, interpellate people as subjects, reinforcing the protections of settler society while undermining the autonomy of the colonized. In regions of contemporary states where such totalitarian infrastructures are implemented, they produce dispositions or patterns of propensity that arbitrate the possibilities of life itself.

The police documents list violations such as being part of a Quran study group on the social media app WeChat or contacting family members who lived in Muslim majority countries as reasons why the person was detained. In many cases when these activities took place they had not yet been criminalized.

Since late 2019 I have been combing through a 52 gigabyte internal policing database from the capital of the Uyghur region, Urumchi. These police files obtained by The Intercept contain thousands upon thousands of reports of Uyghurs and others who were stopped at checkpoints just like the one I went through in Turpan in 2018. I have looked at thousands of images of young Uyghurs staring into the camera of a police officer as they are investigated. Like the young man who was led into the station behind me at the Turpan checkpoint they are moments away from finding out if digital scans of their devices and social network will determine if they are "normal" or "untrustworthy." The police documents list thousands of names, ID numbers, and geolocations of Uyghurs who have been taken away either to prison or a sprawling reeducation camp system. In the neighborhoods, where I have the best police data between 5 and 10 percent of ethnic minority adults were detained (Byler 2021). Often their crimes, or what might be better labeled "pre-crimes" — since they are described in state documents as "not reaching the level of criminality" — had to do with algorithmic assessments of digital activity. The police documents list violations such as being part of a Quran study group on the social media app WeChat or contacting family members who lived in Muslim majority countries as reasons why the person was detained. In many cases when these activities took place they had not yet been criminalized. The total infrastructures of contemporary control collapse the past into the present, even as they mediate the individual choices of the future. As the anthropologist Sareeta Amrute has noted racialized algorithms leave a long tail, affecting social life across multiple domains (2020). In the case of totalizing infrastructures, the long tail transcends temporal dimensions. Past behavior is now being used to diagnose current status: trustworthy, normal, untrustworthy.

According to the Chinese policing literature, the system as it is operationalized across the Uyghur region utilizes a combination of counter-insurgency theory or COIN and a type of so-called predictive policing or Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) (Byler 2019). Technology enabled "full spectrum intelligence" is used to assess the population. This system builds on a grassroots policing system which made civil ministry workers responsible for the behavior of people in units of 100-1000 households. These neighborhood watch units, often referred to as shequ emerged out of the Maoist period, but have been elaborated further through a grid management system that allowed Chinese authorities to consolidate their power over the past several decades. With the arrival of digital forensics and biometric assessment tools in the mid-2010s state workers in the ideological "war zone" of Northwest China began to scan phones to determine who was susceptible to untrustworthy thoughts and to identify people on watch lists due to their untrustworthy relatives. In order to implement this system of control, the state has hired as many as 90,000 police assistants to monitor nested checkpoints and conduct spot checks of phones and IDs (Byler 2021). The system moves from public space, to domestic space, to the digital behaviors of individuals.

> *Ultimately then the state authorities and technologists who write the manuals and the code determine the calculus of this system.*

The case of technology-guided totalitarian statecraft in Northwest China demonstrates that performances of power are concentrated in discrete spaces and times such as checkpoints where police assistants are trained to sort the population into Muslim and non-Muslim. Or as part of a system of periodic home visits where state workers inspect Muslim homes using a scripted checklist. Or in scans of social media accounts using the algorithms of a digital forensics tool, to fulfill the intelligence quotas they are given by leaders higher in command. Ultimately then the state authorities and technologists who write the manuals and the code determine the calculus of this system. Rather than sources of power becoming simply more decentralized, in this context settler colonial relations of domination, and their performance, are more concentrated, just in self-

replicating, modular forms in the space of checkpoints, the scripts of home inspections, and the interfaces of phone scanners. Studies by scholars such as Brian Jefferson (2020) have shown that these types of technologies are not limited to the Chinese case. Many of them are also used by policing agencies and private companies in places like the United States and Europe to reinforce border logics throughout democratic states (Sanchez Boe 2021).

What makes the infrastructures of control in Northwest China different from systems deployed elsewhere in the world is ultimately not the technologies themselves but rather the scale and political system that regulates the technologies. The sheer scale and density of the deployment of checkpoints and biometric data collection in Northwest China is unparalleled elsewhere in the world. This material difference is matched by a political difference that centers on state-controlled media, the size of the surveillant population, and the near total absence of legal protections for the surveilled—who are deemed outside civil protections due to their proximity to the figure of the "terrorist." The Muslims of Northwest China are a population of close to 15 million people—nearly three times the size of the Palestinian population in the West Bank, Israel and Gaza—making them the largest watch-listed population in the world, unable to travel freely or enjoy many of the limited freedoms of the majority of people in China. The technologies used in border policing, the image and face-recognition algorithms of Clearview and Palantir, the behavior analytics of Google and Facebook, do similar work to the tools used in Northwest China. The primary difference is their intensification, and the political regime that accesses their harvested data.

To reprise Allen Feldman's framing (1991) of autonomized political violence in Northern Ireland, infrastructural power embeds power in the performance of both human and technical agents. In Northwest China, advanced technology systems allow infrastructural power to be programmed by state authorities and technologists and instantiated through the performance of state workers and their

technical assessment tools. Information infrastructure when weaponized in this way turns the built environment, state, and corporate power into a single structure of continuous sorting and interrogation. The technical totalitarian systems of the present function with an automated intimacy that moves from chips in smartphones to phenotypes of faces, to datasets and watchlists, and back again. In this sense, they transcend scale, and produce a concentrated practice of power that becomes the context for its own reproduction.

Works Cited

Sareeta Amrute, "Bored techies being casually racist: race as algorithm" (Science, Technology, & Human Values 45, no. 5 2020: 903-933).

Darren Byler, "Preventative Policing as Community Detention in Northwest China" (Made in China Journal, 25 October, 2019, https://madeinchinajournal.com/2019/10/25/preventative-policing-as-community-detention-in-northwest-china/).

Darren Byler, "Chinese Infrastructures of Population Management on the New Silk Road" (Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2021).

Allen Feldman, Formations of violence: The narrative of the body and political terror in Northern Ireland (University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Michel Foucault, Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78 (New York: Springer, 2007).

Carolina Sanchez Boe, The Undeported: The Making of a Floating Population of Exiles in France and Europe (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021).

Brian Jefferson, Digitize and punish: Racial criminalization in the digital age (University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

Authoritarian vernaculars of the right to truth. Exhuming mass graves in Rwanda and Burundi

Astrid Jamar
May, 2021

Astrid Jamar (SOAS) and Laura Major (University of Strathclyde) will present on ‘Authoritarian vernaculars of the right to truth. Exhuming mass graves in Rwanda

and Burundi’. Gerhard Anders (University of Edinburgh) will act as discussant.

When: 7 May 2021 / 2.00-3.30 pm CET

Link: https://zoom.us/j/93210372616pwd=dTZZ...

ID: 93210372616
Password: 4JzWZ6

Abstract

The national governments of Rwanda and Burundi are exhuming mass graves with the promise of revealing truths about the contested histories of past conflict and genocide. In Rwanda, exhumations have been conducted by Rwandan volunteers under the auspices of a government programme to recover and conserve the bodies of victims of the Genocide against the Tutsi. Since December 2019, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Burundi have also begun mass exhumations; these efforts are motivated by truth-seeking and reconciliation aspirations but also help to articulate a specific narrative of victimhood and state legitimacy. In both cases, the state employs a vernacularised form of forensic practice with techniques that differentiate remains and prepare them for public display but with much other forensic intention and method absent. In this article we draw upon and then extend Merry’s work on the vernacularisation of human rights principles (1996; 2006) in assessing the articulation between these efforts, the global rise of discourse and mobilisation of the ‘right to truth’ and the associated practice of forensic exhumation. Drawing upon our ethnographic fieldwork in Rwanda and Burundi, we argue that the ambiguities of the ‘right to truth’ and the political nature of truth-making render these exhumations powerful political tools that in these settings allow the mobilization and consolidation of particular authoritarian vernaculars.

See you on Zoom!

Here is the full schedule of the webinar series.
You can also access the webinar videos on Allegra's YouTube channel.

Sinicizing Islam in Contemporary China

Jing Wang
May, 2021

Modern states, both liberal and non-liberal, tend to deploy totalitarian-style strategies which force an “internal other” to assimilate into the dominant group. Such assimilationist policies presume the existence of a mainstream society or culture to which ethnic or religious minorities must conform. Yet, the processes and strategies of assimilation may differ in content and degree, depending on a given state. In contemporary China, Muslim minorities are increasingly under the pressure of Sinicization (zhongguohua)—the assimilationist policies of the

Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Among the Hui Muslim communities, the impact of Sinicization is reflected through mosque architectural style and language education. But it is important to note that the impact of Sinicization extends far beyond the Hui communities and into other minority groups. In a sense, the trend of Sinicization among Hui Muslims as a concrete manifestation of a series of totalitarian strategies led by an authoritarian regime in a Han-dominant society.

When we talk about Muslims in China today, we usually think of the Uyghurs, a Turkic-speaking Muslim population in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the northwestern region. While the histories between the Uyghurs and the Hui are interrelated, the Hui differ from the Uyghurs in geographical, linguistic, and other aspects. The Hui constitute the largest Muslim ethnicity in the People's Republic of China (PRC). According to the 2010 National Consensus, the Hui population is over ten million, slightly larger than that of the Uyghur population. While the Uyghurs mostly live in Xinjiang and speak a Turkic language, the Hui live in every province of China and speak various regional dialects. Therefore, the Hui are also known as Chinese-speaking Muslims or Sinophone Muslims.

> *The local Muslims resisted the order and protested en masse. Their act of resistance was videoed, photographed, and circulated widely online. The local government backed down but asked for "renovation"—a euphemism to remove the mosque's green dome and minarets and replace them with Chinese-style pagoda domes.*

Since 2017, the CCP has been implementing various Sinicization policies. For Hui Muslims, the Arabic-style architecture and Arabic language are two primary sites under such political pressures. In 2018, Weizhou Grand Mosque in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in Northwest China received a demolition order from the local government. The local Muslims resisted the order and protested en masse. Their act of resistance was videoed, photographed, and circulated widely online. The local government backed down but asked for "renovation"—a euphemism to

remove the mosque's green dome and minarets and replace them with Chinese-style pagoda domes. Another less visible, yet painfully felt trend, is the closure of many informal Qur'anic classes and even state-approved Arabic language programs. Some religious clerics (ahong) stressed that they would not teach Arabic classes outside the mosques or without the permission of the Islamic Association of China (IAC), a nationwide organization overseen by the CCP's United Front Work Department.

These cases show that Sinicization amounts to Hanification (hanhua), meaning assimilation measured by the degree of conforming to the mainstream Han Chinese society. Han party officials consider the pagoda and big roof style as quintessentially Chinese. Removing the Arabic-style architectural elements or replacing them with the so-called Chinese-style structure thus reflects a Han-centric view on transforming religious spaces. This idea of assimilation is a legacy from the totalitarian tendency during the Mao era when art forms—ranging from literature, dance, film, to architecture—were to embody and further instill a singular ideology of the modern Chinese nation. Liang Sicheng, a renowned Chinese architect and intellectual, spear-headed the "Big Roof" (da wuding) design in Beijing in the 1950s, following the Soviet experts' advice on the "Socialist content, national form" (shehui zhuyi neirong, minzu xingshi). While adopting a socialist ideology, what Liang and most other policymakers espoused is still a Han-centric vision of what a Chinese nation should look like in its buildings.

The Han-centric vision of architectural styles also flattens the internal diversity of Islamic landscape in China. Since the 1980s, China's Islamic landscape has blossomed. The Chinese state has also facilitated the religious and commercial networks cultivated between China's Muslim communities and other Muslim states in Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. However, with the growing Han chauvinism at home, the CCP increasingly tends to project a homogenous image of Muslim cultures through Sinicization. For instance, since the 2000s, the city of Yinchuan in Ningxia has been developed as China's flagship Muslim city, resulting in an urban display of Arabic-style architecture and halal signs. Yet, from 2017 to

2019, the local government quietly “renovated” the Arabic-style mosques and major avenues decorated with the so-called Arabic elements. As Michael Malzer (2020) points out, the miscellaneous Arabic elements reflect “an open declaration of intent to get closer to an imagined Arabia, and not a reflection of any existing historical relations.” In other words, many urban constructions are influenced by a variety of Muslim cultures beyond the Middle East or any single nation state.

Furthermore, the state’s regulation of Arabic education among Hui Muslims reflects a wider trend of Sinicization among other ethnic and religious minorities. In official meetings and public statements, the Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasizes the importance of a shared “common language” (tongyong yuyan) as key to the “cultural identification” (wenhua rentong) of a unified Chinese nation. While China has many different languages such as Cantonese, Hokkien, and Tibetan, the CCP only acknowledges Mandarin Chinese (putong hua) as the official language while regarding others as minority languages or regional dialects. However, in recent years, the state has been further promoting Mandarin Chinese as the “national language” (guoyu), a major vehicle of Sinicization through educational system.

In the past decade, certain ethnic minorities—Tibetans, Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Koreans, and Mongols—have been pressured to accept a new model of bilingual education. In the old model, both minority languages and Mandarin Chinese are given equal weight in course instruction. The new model turns Mandarin Chinese into the de facto major medium for course instruction while rendering the minority languages either as mere subjects of study or even less (Atwood 2020). In Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), for example, many parents and students protested against the local Educational Department’s announcement of implementing this bilingual model in primary and middle schools in 2020. While such grassroots protests exert certain pressures upon the local government, it is still difficult to predict whether the CCP would change its course in the near future.

As for Hui Muslims, Arabic language even falls out of the categories of either

minority language or regional dialect. In most cases, Arabic as a language is used for business activities, religious training, or scholarly studies. Many Hui Muslims only use it for daily prayer but cannot speak or write Arabic. Some Hui also speak Urdu, Farsi, Russian, and other languages for business and/or study. Yet, the wider trend of Sinicization still exerts significant pressures upon Arabic classes among the Sinophone Muslim communities.

> *While adopting a socialist ideology, what Liang and most other policymakers espoused is still a Han-centric vision of what a Chinese nation should look like in its buildings.*

While this essay focuses on the impact of Sinicization on Hui Muslims, we need to recognize that Turkophone Muslims—especially the Uyghurs—bear the brunt of the extreme assimilationist policies in China. Since 2016, the state has been systematically setting up re-education camps across Xinjiang. The goal is to transform Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking Muslims into "patriotic and productive Chinese citizens" through learning Mandarin Chinese, singing patriotic songs, marrying Han Chinese, and becoming forced laborers transferred to factories in other parts of China (see Yixiaocuo's Camp Album Project and Darren Byler's ongoing series in SupChina). In the case of Turkophone Muslims, these assimilationist policies are not just a reflection of Han chauvinism; they are also inflected through the state discourse of anti-terrorism.

In the post-9/11 world, the Chinese government swiftly picked up the anti-terrorist discourse in its domestic and foreign policies. The Bush administration (2000-2008), pursuing a "global war on terror", hastily agreed with Beijing to list the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (a militant group which seeks Uyghur independence from China) as a terrorist group. In 2009, a series of inter-ethnic clashes took place in China, which started as civil disputes involving both Uyghurs and Han Chinese. In Guangzhou, a young Uyghur worker was accused of sexually assaulting a Han woman. A brawl broke out between Uyghur and Han workers. After two Uyghurs were beaten to death, mass protests soon broke in

Xinjiang's provincial city of Ürümqi. Many Uyghurs and Han civilians died in the clashes. The government soon identified the incident as a "terrorist attack" with "foreign connection." Since then, China has been imposing increasingly stricter of assimilation policies toward the Uyghur population in Xinjiang.

> *The goal is to transform Uyghurs and other Turkic-speaking Muslims into "patriotic and productive Chinese citizens" through learning Mandarin Chinese, singing patriotic songs, marrying Han Chinese, and becoming forced laborers transferred to factories in other parts of China (see Yixiaocuo's Camp Album Project and Darren Byler's ongoing series in SupChina).*

All in all, while the Chinese state tends to flatten the heterogeneous Muslims cultures, we need to recognize the different but interrelated experiences of various Muslim groups in contemporary China. Today, Hui Muslims are living in the shadows of the state's narrowly defined Sinicization process, though with relatively more room for religious freedom and day-to-day activities than the Turkophone Muslims. However, in the long run, it is still hard to foresee to what extent the totalitarian tendency of assimilation would affect China's Muslim and other minority groups.

References

Atwood, Christopher. 30 August 2020. "Bilingual Education in Inner Mongolia: An Explainer." Made in China.

Malzer, Michael. February 2020. "No more Arabian Nights at the Yellow River: The End of Yinchuan's Image-Building Strategy as China's Flagship Muslim City." Urbanities. Vol.10, Supplement 3.

Thum, Rian. 2014. The Sacred Routes of Uyghur history. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

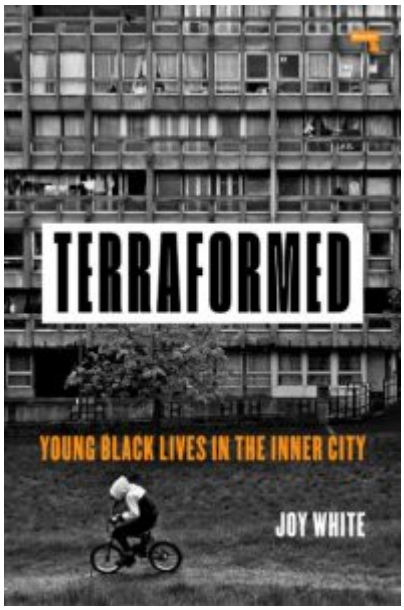
Featured image by Markus Winkler on Unsplash.

Terraformed

Federica Banfi
May, 2021

Terraformed by Joy White aims at making sense and contextualising the vulnerability and inequality experienced by the Afrodiasporic population of the UK. The author describes her effort as 'connecting the dots' (pag. 2) between the struggles of the British Black working class community and the wider institutional and historical context. She concentrates on a square mile, the area of Forest Gate, in East London, a place she knows very well as she lived there for many

years. White offers a new theoretical framework to the study and understanding of the urban environment, which she calls *hyper-local demarcation*. This framework allows to look at how power dynamics and racialised narratives work locally, at the level of the street, and impact on Black lives. The four dimensions of the framework—legislation, communities, sonic landscape and town planning—are interconnected in shaping the lives of young Black people living in the area . Each chapter offers an analysis of how this framework operates in the everyday.



White opens the first chapter recounting her experience of racism during her first job in a Civil Service department in Newham in the late 1970s. This incipit positions the author in the study and highlights her motives for the writing of this book. White gives us a detailed geographical and historical description of the area identifying how it became a poor, multicultural neighbourhood clearly connected to the British colonial past and the fate of the Royal Docks. Describing the political context of Newham, White concentrates her analysis on the effects of decades of austerity which have augmented the challenges experienced by Newham's inhabitants. Austerity drove policy changes that established neoliberal values, such as the pursuit of profit, behind many state institutions. Many public services were privatised, benefits for households were capped, and community resources depleted. As a result, many disadvantaged people found themselves juggling with stagnating income, precarious working conditions, and rising living costs while the quality of public services and social housing plummeted. These effects were especially felt by the Black population: in 2013, youth unemployment rose to 45% for Black youth, compared to 18% for white youth (p. 28). White denounces how austerity fuelled a rise in poverty and ill-health, both mental and physical, while removing safety nets for people who are struggling (p.97). All of this happened with little resistance from the public:

> *Austerity has hushed the voices of the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised. As civic participation often declines in more unequal societies, it allows toxic policies to be implemented unchallenged (p. 35).*

White accuses capitalism's predatory nature for destroying our capacity to care for each other while denouncing the little accountability of privatised services which, driven by profit, are too big to fail despite their inability to provide quality services. She brings to our attention the cases of Carillon, Serco and G4S. Each of these companies employs thousands of people, many of them living in the area, offering various kinds of services from security and prison management, to health care and soft facilities management (including catering and cleaning at local hospitals).

The central chapters of the book are an ethnographic account of how people from different backgrounds live in Forest Gate side by side yet separated. Young Black men, often poor and jobless, spend their free time in public spaces socialising and making music. Grime music is a musical genre that emerged from Newham and its connection to place is evident in the lyrics, which reference local place-names, and in the music videos, which show Forest Gate corners and its youth. White argues that music and performance allow young Black men to creatively express opinions that are otherwise silenced in other public arenas. Nevertheless, town-planners and their regeneration projects are maginalizing these young men by labelling them as troublesome, disrupting their social interactions through policing and effectively pushing them out of the public space. In the area pockets of whiteness are now emerging: leisure spaces and local businesses cater to the new white inhabitants while Black youth are excluded, either because they cannot afford to consume in such places or because they are made to feel at best out of place, and at worst clearly unwelcom
ed.

The symbolic, structural and slow violence Black youth experience since childhood transforms into physical violence in the streets for teenagers. White

juxtaposes the contemporary hostile environment and aggressive policing tactics with the killings of three young Black men in the streets of Newham:

‘Violence to Black lives occurs against a backdrop of five decades of a hostile environment that has erased and ignored the contribution that Black citizens have made. Instead, Black communities have been positioned as a drain on British society and a danger to British norms and British values’ (pp. 91-92).

> *The author highlights how Black youth experience many kinds of violence and microaggression, living in a ‘perpetual state of anxiety’ (p. 94) fearing prison or deportation.*

“Violence is both physical and verbal, gradually permeating everyday experiences until it becomes a sickness, a form of social and emotional suffering. When combined with processes and techniques that make poverty and racism not just possible, but acceptable, maybe we do arrive at a point where for some, life—even their own—has little value” (p. 97).

White shares with us her personal experience of youth violence as she recounts how her nephew was stabbed in the street aged 19. Her evocative and emotional memoir chapter delivers her message with incredible strength. The brutality of structural violence is never at rest for Black people: ‘Seconds after Nico’s life support had been switched off the police walked into the room with a body bag — because in their eye he was [criminal] evidence’ of his own murder, his family treated like a nuisance to the investigation (p. 104).

Terraformed is a short book, but its length does not detract from its strength. White’s contribution to existing literature on legacies of colonialism, racial discrimination and their urban demarcations develops around a new framework of hyper-local demarcation which brings together the dimensions of legislation, community, sonic landscape and town planning. Through this framework, the author delivers a clear analysis of the socio-historical and economic conditions of Newham and the effects of national policies at the micro level of the street. At the

same time, this framework allows for a vivid and evocative portrait of the neighbourhood, giving the reader a sense of what it feels like to be a young Black man in Newham today. Written in accessible language and sold at an accessible price, *Terraformed* should reach a wide audience interested in better understanding how we arrived to the point of needing a Black Lives Matter movement.

Featured Image by Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona on Unsplash

Words, numbers, culture: Thinking with Sally Merry at the Universal Periodic Review

Jane Cowan
May, 2021

Jane K. Cowan (University of Sussex) will give a talk titled ‘Words, numbers, culture: Thinking with Sally Merry at the Universal Periodic Review’. Julie Billaud (Graduate Institute in Geneva) will act as discussant.

When: 30 April 2021 / 2.00-3.30 pm CET

Link: https://zoom.us/j/93210372616pwd=dTZZ...

ID: 93210372616
Password: 4JzWZ6

Abstract

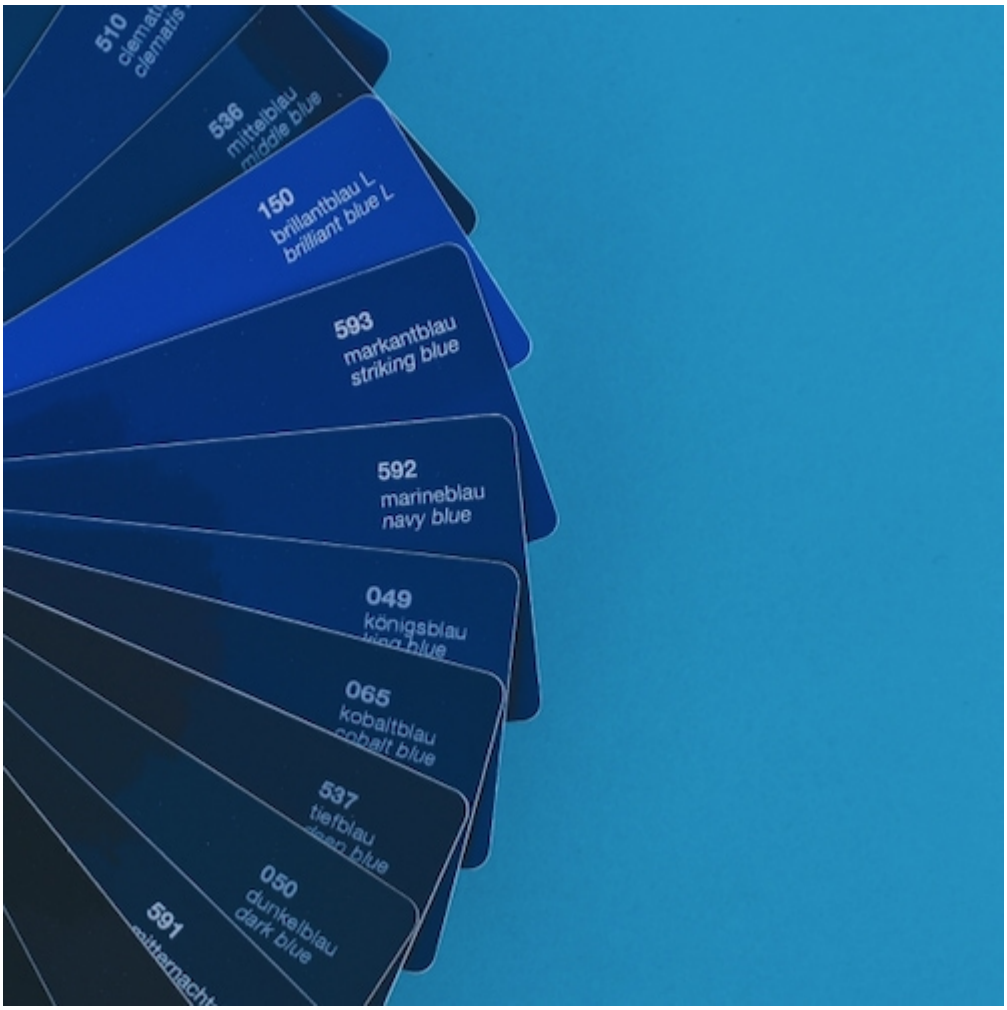
Currently being prepared for a festschrift honoring the work of Sally Engle Merry, this paper involves ‘thinking with Sally Merry’ in two senses. It recalls conversations with Merry over a period of more than two decades, and in particular her visit to Geneva in 2011 when she accompanied me to a session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which I was then researching along with Julie Billaud. With so little ethnographic work having been carried out on the United Nations human rights system up to that point, we both felt a strong desire to ‘compare notes’ regarding the similarities and differences between CEDAW, an example of the treaty body system and the UPR. In a second sense, the paper involves my continuing engagement with Merry’s broader concerns with language, quantification and culture as I have tried to make sense of practices surrounding the Universal Periodic Review as a new monitoring mechanism with its distinctive logics of audit, power and influence. In the presentation I examine the practices of members of civil society and non-governmental organisations, another core concern of Merry’s work, focusing on activities developed by UPR-Info, an NGO that provides crucial support to the UPR process. I look first at the recently invented ritual of the UPR Pre-sessions, focusing on language used by civil society actors and questions of vernacularization. I then consider the preoccupation with quantification, showing how and why it works rather differently in the UPR than in other parts of the UN system where indicators have taken hold. The theme of ‘culture’ runs through the paper, particularly regarding ‘UN culture’: the quickly normalized and taken-for-granted yet somewhat strange conventions of everyday practice at the United Nations.

See you on Zoom!

Here is the full schedule of the webinar series.
You can also access the webinar videos on Allegra's YouTube channel.

Anglo-American hegemony in contemporary anthropology: Some personal dilemmas

David Berliner
May, 2021



Disclaimer: Over the last few days, I have had a writing episode. Nothing had come out of my brain for months. I was teaching online and worrying about students and family. All of a sudden, I felt the urge to scribble something. Then I hesitated to share it. Who will be interested? Who cares about this now when we are in the middle of a pandemic, eyes tired from too much time spent in front of screens, filled with uncertainty and helplessness? I am unable to pretend. I'm not sure I'd have the energy to discuss ideas. Don't we need to rest and preserve some strength for the months to come? Well, I couldn't stop it. This is also part of the pandemic experience. I've heard so many colleagues sharing their desire to build something new out of this terrible situation that affects us all. Me too, I dream of another world afterwards. I hope that we can think together to create better academic communities, and not rush on with business as usual.

****

“Since modern man experiences himself both as the seller and as the commodity to be sold on the market, his self-esteem depends on conditions beyond his control. If he is ‘successful,’ he is valuable; if he is not, he is worthless. The degree of insecurity which results from this orientation can hardly be overestimated. If one feels that one’s own value is not constituted primarily by the human qualities one possesses, but by one’s success on a competitive market with ever-changing conditions, one’s self-esteem is bound to be shaky and in constant need of confirmation by others. Hence, one is driven to drive relentlessly for success, and any setback is a severe threat to one’s self-esteem; helplessness, insecurity, and inferiority feelings are the result.”
[Erich Fromm, *Man for himself*, 1947]

The issue of privilege is widely discussed in anthropological circles these days. Who represents whom? Who has access to what? These are very healthy questions that, from a French-speaking Belgian perspective, often still seem light years away (as talks about diversity within academia and decolonised curricula are still scarce, unfortunately). However, one aspect of these questions is almost unanimously disregarded: that of the current Anglo-American hegemony in the production of anthropological knowledge. I say “Anglo-American” because the English language has become dominant in our discipline. But this specificity also has to do with the visibility and attractiveness of academic infrastructures—i.e. universities, scientific associations, journals and university presses, publishers, networks of diffusion, etc.—mainly based in the United States and, to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom. And let me be clear: I know that I am part of the problem, something I discuss below. I have dear friends and caring colleagues with whom I enjoy exchanging, learning and collaborating who work in these environments. I am equally aware that this text will be read differently depending on the academic bubbles. This short opinion paper (I am not a specialist of Higher Education globalised power relations, nor of Gramsci) doesn’t concern individuals. It is about a system of privileges that doesn’t tell its name.

I don’t think that what is produced in these sites of knowledge and written in these venues is intrinsically superior to any others in the world.

It is a truism to say that anthropology is dominated by scholars educated and knowledge produced in American and British Universities. These institutions are, however, plural and unequal to each other. Some few are part of an elite; many others are peripheral. My colleagues working in these academic worlds repeatedly drew my attention to the fact that just a few Anglo-American campuses are at the peak of the pyramid (and that the rest is struggling), whilst it is sometimes easier to affiliate to the “summit” coming from highly considered European or Asian research centres—easier than from peripheral Anglo-American universities. I am very aware of such complex national diversity and internal inequalities. Still, seen from abroad, some facts are inescapable. Most “top-ranked” anthropology journals are either edited in the US or in the UK; according to google scholar metrics, the first 20 are published in the US and the UK, with the exception of Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale and Ethnos. The same can be said for the “best” schools (LSE, Harvard, Cambridge, Chicago, UCL, and so on), whilst important anthropological associations are based there. These institutions and organisations are eminently respectable with a long history and famous ancestors. Journals have very high-quality boards and the review process has always struck me as rigorous and remarkably well managed. Beyond doubt, their recognition is fully deserved. However, personally, I don’t think that what is produced in these sites of knowledge and written in these venues is intrinsically superior to any others in the world. I find stimulating papers to read and cite from widely acclaimed as much as from some more (unfortunately) obscure regional publications. What the first have that the latter do not is an outstanding visibility and attractiveness to the extent that Anglo-American journals have growingly become representative of “the” discipline.

This brings me to the central issue in my questioning. In the US and UK, this system is imposed on academics who have little choice but to follow it to satisfy their passion for research. American Ethnologist and JRAI, among many others, are their local journals. And I feel for them as they have to maneuver in such an alienating field of rankings and evaluations, where access to the most prestigious venues is the essential criterion for obtaining the best jobs in the best universities.

> *A toxic cocktail which affects especially the most vulnerable (doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, adjuncts, this "cannon fodder" of the institution).*

More and more anthropologists have become critical of the neoliberal values of academic competition embodied in the diktat of evaluations, the temporality of urgency, the use of metrics, the quest for funding, the precariousness of positions as well as the various loads once one is "inside" university. These aggregate with

the inherent pathogenic conditions to the practice of research—the need for recognition, the existence of castes and inequalities, loneliness. A toxic cocktail which affects especially the most vulnerable (doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, adjuncts, this "cannon fodder" of the institution). An open-access book by Robert Borofksy (brought to my attention by Doug Falen) about the professional quest for individual status within American anthropology is extremely valuable, and it certainly can be extrapolated outside this context.

It is equally sad to think that some ideas are considered "interesting" and attract attention because of their site of publication, international circulation and sacrosanct citationality. What I find more worrying is that these same academic infrastructures have become holy grails for so many anthropologists around the world. There is a globalised mimetic desire at stake to gain recognition. And I am talking about my own case, that of a privileged tenured professor in a European university. That is the way the tale goes: First, one has to (try to) be published in

the Anglo-American journals—American Anthropologist, Current Anthropology, JRAI and so forth—where the "important disciplinary debates" are taking place. As if these venues were neutral when they, in fact, embody local-but-globalised research traditions and emanate from centres of power. Only then should you send your articles to their Belgian, Italian or South Korean cousins (who also have serious editorial committees). Why so? I think we all know the answer. This is the manner to secure a job and to be part of ongoing anthropological discussions today. There is no explicit rule on this. Rather, it is becoming a shared habitus that does not even need to be said.

> *There is a globalised mimetic desire at stake to gain recognition.*

In the same vein, scholars are strongly encouraged to do a post-doctorate in one of these Anglo-American institutions. When I started my PhD in Brussels, I promptly understood the conduct necessary for survival. From the onset, my low self-esteem and the fear of "not finding a permanent position" were unhealthy triggers.

Such habitus is learned very early on by many doctoral students and young researchers. By observing and participating, without a clear pedagogy, the novices internalize the implicit rules of their professional environment: a competitive ethos emphasizing exploits (i.e. publish in the best journals, have read everything, go international, market yourself, and so forth), glorifying the absence of boundaries between scientific and private life and maintaining silence about negative emotions as well as mental health issues. Unfortunately, most academic ecosystems do not have the dimension of "holding" so dear to Winnicott, this capacity to welcome researchers' anxieties and to nurture their creativity. Immersed in this gray area that is called "intellectual passion," most of them accept the potential toxicity of the environment that holds them, as a toddler would adapt to a depressed mother. Soon, they will flagellate themselves to comply with the ecosystem demands, both their protector and their torturer. The institution will survive. No doubt many of us find in there the perfume of the

failing environments that we have already known before.

When you are not part of the legitimised archipelagos of knowledge production (and while I see Francophone Belgium as a privileged academic environment, it remains peripheral to the Anglo-American realm), you have to go international. Anglo-American scholarly infrastructures constituted social affordances for me as a young researcher who was trying to escape the local nepotism that was rampant at the time. These infrastructures mainly promised an openness and gave me access to new and large anthropological continents. After a few years spent in the UK, I received a postdoctoral grant in the US at a major institution. Clearly to impress my father—that didn't come out as a great success—, and to collect the famous "postdoc in the US" visa. There, I learned even more about competition and felt extremely lonely, yet I worked like a fool to acquire another grail: an

article in American Ethnologist. This publication, which required an enormous amount of linguistic energy and a certain degree of paradigmatic plasticity, earned me many “with that piece, you’ll get a position!” remarks, and I indeed eventually obtained a job. Years of performance anxiety finally rewarded.

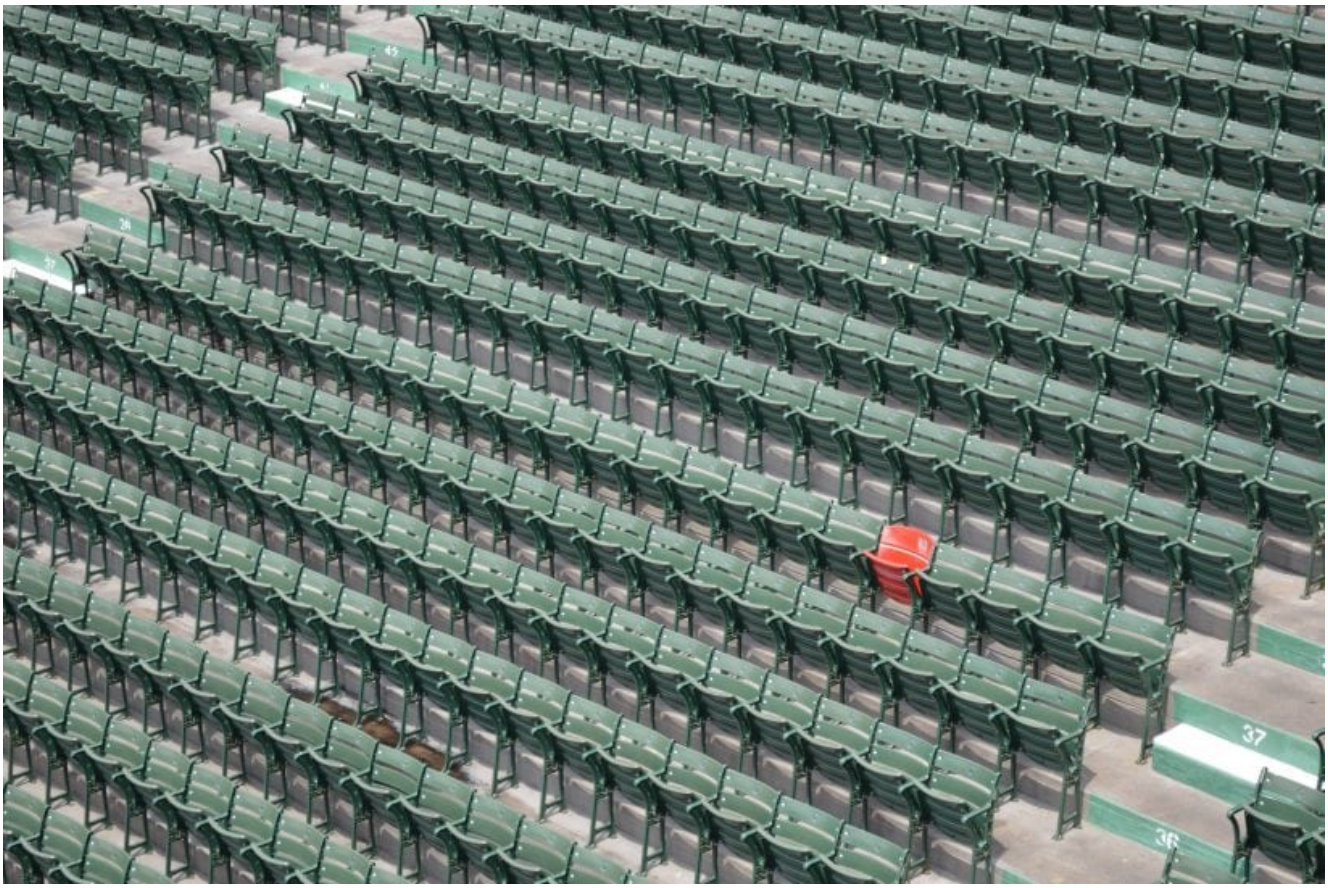
> *By observing and participating, without a clear pedagogy, the novices internalize the implicit rules of their professional environment.*

Now that it is my turn to be seated in selection committees sometimes, I am struck by the extent to which Anglo-American journals and scholarly experiences constitute almost unavoidable assets in the hiring and grant-awarding process in Belgium. Again, there is no explicitly formulated rule here. This is a recent phenomenon, mainly from those who have studied abroad in the Anglo-American world. I myself had this reflex of “ticking the Anglo-American box” when evaluating applications, as if having these trophies is an indisputable sign of quality. Certainly, publications in “local” venues are still essential to get a job in many universities, as they are in the US and the UK. However, it is as if Anglo-American references and fellowships—that are, of course, extremely relevant to assess research creativity and capacity—have become indispensable in a great deal of other academic cultures. Is this a new standard? I think so but, dear reader, do not hesitate to tell your experiences.

These examples raise questions. Firstly, about the diversity of anthropological traditions. American and British schools and journals have their own theoretical inclinations. To be one of them, the aspirant may be tempted to adopt their paradigmatic codes. I recall an article submitted to an American venue whose editor insisted that I come up with a title that sounded terribly postmodern to my ears but was in line with what they were publishing. The globalised “writing culture” is undoubtedly an example of the attractiveness of Anglo-American paradigms, although a great plurality persists, I observe.

What are the multiple impacts of such dominant models on other scientific communities? Are anthropologists more concerned with cultural heterogeneity

than with scientific diversity? Even more importantly, how does such a scholarly hegemony contribute to the universalisation of a neoliberal agenda of knowledge production and evaluation?



Yet, as I mentioned earlier in this post, I myself used Anglo-American resources to escape local forms of nepotism. At the same time, I see now how such resources are being globalised to the extent that it is difficult to exist academically *outside* of them.

> *Are anthropologists more concerned with cultural heterogeneity than with scientific diversity?*

Obviously, there is a balance to be found. It is all but simple, and I am trying to paint a nuanced picture of the situation. Yet, let us fantasise for a second. In the cosmopolitan world of anthropology I dream of, US and UK-based PhD students

might do a postdoctorate in Belgian, Italian and South Korean universities. They as well as more established scholars would primarily publish in these local non-Anglo-American venues, while everybody would get access to Anglo-American hubs of excellence. Are these not the virtues of *décentrement* of which anthropologists are the greatest defenders? On my dreamed planet, where all scientific journals would be open access and where there would be no PhDs, postdocs, researchers and adjuncts in situations of precarity, academics would substitute an ethics of care for our politics of competition, by always having a big critical laugh at metrics and other tricks of neoliberal evaluations. In a moving reflection on what was significant in his scientific life, the late Jan Blommaert, whom I sadly never got to meet, wrote:

"What was not important was competition and its attributes of behavioral and relational competitiveness, the desire or urge to be the best, to win contests, to be seen as the champ, to proceed tactically, to forge strategic alliances and what not."

> *Academic capitalism is structural and it knows how to play with our narcissistic wounds and need for recognition.*

In such a world, ideas would be attractive not by where they are developed, but by their intrinsic heuristic richness. Likewise, candidates for a position would be selected on the basis of texts without knowing in which specific journals they have been published and by valorising their linguistic diversification. I say "dream," as academic capitalism is structural and it knows how to play with our narcissistic wounds and need for recognition. We are dealing here with visceral values related to symbolic and economic forms of profit. And there are no simple answers, because national contexts are very different from each other whilst changes must be political as well as behavioural. I have devoted considerable energy to trying to gain legitimacy through Anglo-American knowledge production infrastructures and I still do. Yet, if I am part of the problem, I can be part of the solution. Individual initiatives are important (especially those from

Anglo-American established scholars). One needs to have loud voices in the field declare for instance, “from now on, I will write (open access) books only,” and decide to break with this system, whilst we can challenge the globalisation of such hegemonic model on multiple levels, e.g. by creating exchange forums in scientific associations (like the EASA), by demystifying it with our colleagues and students, by raising awareness among our authorities and by continuing to cite our favourite authors whether they are Anglo-American or not. However, isolated academics will have no power on their own. They have to be supported by their universities, national scientific agencies and critical anthropological communities. It is only the conjunction of these levels that, in my opinion, would make it possible to stop the machine in which we currently alienate ourselves.

Image Credits:

Featured image Shades of Blue by Markus Spiske on Unsplash.

Podium photo by Romain Chollet on Unsplash.

Graduate photo by Cole Keister on Unsplash.

USA by Night photo by NASA on Unsplash.

Gradients photo Veronica Benavides on Unsplash.

Reference:

Winnicott, D.A. 1960: The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 41: 585-595.